



PHD

Towards a better understanding of the foreign language education of boys and girls in comprehensive schools, with particular reference to sex differences and the drop-out problem

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TOWARDS
A BETTER UNDERSTANDING
OF
THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION
OF
BOYS AND GIRLS
IN
COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOLS
with particular reference to
SEX DIFFERENCES
and the
DROP-OUT PROBLEM

submitted by Robert C. Powell
for the degree of PhD
of the University of Bath
1986

VOLUME ONE

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| PHD | |

NOTE ON METHOD 'B' CANDIDATURE

The Regulations of the University of Bath allow Staff Candidature for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy by two methods. Extracts from the paragraphs relating specifically to Method B read as follows:

18.6 Staff Candidature - Method B

- b) A candidate for a higher Degree under this regulation:
 - ii) shall have been engaged in research during his period of employment at the University...and if he is a candidate for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy shall have been employed at the University for at least three years.
 - iii) shall submit specially composed or published work or a series of published papers within a field of work included in the studies of the University, or any combination of those.

The format of this thesis resembles that of a conventional thesis submitted for a higher degree. However, as the notes at the beginning of each chapter explain, parts of the work have already been published in article or book form whereas other sections reporting recent research have been composed especially for inclusion in this thesis.

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Ours is a precarious language, as every writer knows, in which the merest shadow line often separates affirmation from negation, sense from nonsense and one sex from the other.

JAMES THURBER: Lanterns and Lances. (1961)

OUTLINE OF AIMS

This thesis may be unusual in its design but its purposes are clear. Drawing upon articles and chapters written over an eight-year span, it illustrates a series of personal attempts to come to terms with the complexity of a social and educational phenomenon. There is, I trust, a developmental strand through the writing which reveals an increasingly critical awareness of the field under investigation together with a growing familiarity with research methodologies that has enabled the writer to broaden the scope of the study and render the insights more valid. Nevertheless, there is an intuitive quality in parts of the discussion which should not be undervalued. Like most intuition it has, as its source, considerable deliberation, in this case following on from direct classroom observation, discussions with pupils, teachers, advisers and other researchers, reading and reflecting on a wide range of literature and, of course, direct practical experience.

There are instances of repetition, moments when the restatement of an idea already forwarded tentatively seems essential. I offer apologies in advance but retain the right to underline the seriousness of certain aspects of the discussion.

I have mapped out the chronology of my interventions in this field on pages 6 & 7. By and large the narrative of the thesis follows this sequence. Nevertheless, the aims of the whole work are worth spelling

out at the outset, since they may not match exactly the sequence of the separate units. It should become apparent, however, that they underpin every stage in my thinking and writing. Some ideas that are touched upon in the early sections are picked up again later and receive more extensive treatment.

Firstly, an attempt is made, through an analysis of the available literature and by charting policy decisions (if they can be called such), to monitor the growing concern for equality of educational opportunity for both sexes. Studies of sex differences in foreign language learning as opposed to first language acquisition are scant, to say the least, compared with other areas of the curriculum, but recent studies, albeit on a small scale, indicate that an increasing number of educationists are beginning to take an interest and report on their findings.

Secondly, I shall examine the extent of the imbalance as manifested through all sectors of the educational pyramid, that is, from the foundations of secondary education through to the teaching profession itself. A monitoring process has been going on for some years, but I shall present the most recent statistics available.

Thirdly, mindful of the hazards laid for anyone entering the minefield of research into psychological sex differences and sex-role formation, I shall guide the reader to an examination of some of the claims and counter-claims produced by academics over the past two decades.

Fourthly, abandoning theoretical perspectives, I shall review current practice in our secondary schools. What are the factors that hinder and help equality of opportunity in foreign language education? Formal elements such as curriculum organisation, staffing, arrangements of teaching groups, materials, subject-matter and contents will come under scrutiny as will fluctuating variables such as prevailing pupil and teacher attitudes. It is my purpose here also to report on personal research in schools. During the past five years various questionnaires have been developed and administered in a number of local mixed comprehensive schools. There have also been surveys designed to gather information on organisational policies affecting language classes and the composition of the sexes within teaching groups. I have, on several occasions, collected reactions from teachers and pupils and these provide fascinating insights into the perceptions of and pressures on the two sets of central protagonists in the enquiry. Over one thousand pupils were involved in the main surveys and teachers in over fifty schools have been consulted.

Fifthly, conscious of the need to improve foreign language education generally and, more specifically, fired by the desire to encourage more pupils of both sexes to include a foreign language in their curriculum for longer, I shall propose certain practical remedies which, if implemented, might bring about an increase in the numbers of boys and girls studying a foreign language for longer than the basic compulsory minimum of two or three years.

Finally, I shall make recommendations for further research on this topic. Research into foreign language teaching and learning has not been in receipt of much financial support from any of the usual agencies. Even the most substantial funded project in recent years in this country - the Nuffield Enquiry into the current state of modern language learning in further and higher education - operated on a minuscule budget compared to most scientific or technologically based subject studies. I am, therefore, particularly grateful to my employer, the University of Bath, for awarding me a research studentship during the years 1983-86. The presence of a full-time researcher facilitated the administration of questionnaires and the analysis of various sorts of results. Moreover, the specific areas of her study have added valuable data to the pool of knowledge acquired over the years, notably in classroom interaction analysis, a research dimension obviously impracticable for a full-time teacher in higher education such as myself. I am conscious of the fact that my own 'field-work' has been conducted in schools that do not represent a truly valid set. Restrictions of travel and time have meant that the sample is, in every sense of the definition, a convenience sample.

There remain many aspects of foreign language education that warrant further scrutiny; aspects to do with the process of language learning itself that are barely touched upon in this thesis such as sex differences in linguistic aptitude, instrumental and integrative motivation or learning styles; or more general features that influence these such as social milieu, cultural values and

expectations and parental aspirations.

Ultimately, the person most likely to influence events in the short and long term is the practising teacher for whom the maxim must surely be:

"Equal opportunity for the boys and girls is an essential feature of good educational practice." (Pratt et al, 1984).

The bulk of my writing has, over the years, been aimed not at the academic researcher but at the practitioners in our schools. It is my belief that all pupils are capable of deriving enjoyment and benefit from learning a foreign language. I know that many teachers share that view.

It is time for a concerted effort to be made by policy-makers, curriculum planners, advisers, trainers and classroom teachers. Foreign languages are losing status within the secondary school curriculum. Languages teachers need to ensure that their voices are heard in any debate about equality of opportunity. They need to attract more support from parents and careers counsellors - two crucially important influences on children's choices. Otherwise the drift away from languages, especially marked at the present time among the male student population, will continue inexorably to undermine all good intentions. To say that this would be a lamentable situation is an understatement. It would run counter to what most reasonable people perceive as 'good education' - namely, the provision of opportunities for every pupil to develop her or his talents and skills to the full.

A CHRONOLOGY
OF INTEREST IN AND RESEARCH INTO
SEX DIFFERENCES IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING
IN BRITISH SECONDARY SCHOOLS

1979: Publications:

Sex differences in language learning: a review of the evidence.
Audio-Visual Language Journal, vol. 17, no. 1, pp. 19-24.

What gender is Italian?

Journal of the Association of Teachers of Italian (JATI)
no. 27, Spring, pp. 33-39.

Other Activities: Survey of examination statistics.

1981: Pilot project in two mixed comprehensive schools.

1982: Publications:

Foreign languages: the avoidable options. (with Peter Littlewood)
British Journal of Language Teaching, vol. 20, no. 3, pp. 153-161.

Other Activities: International literature search.

1983: Publications:

Why choose French? Boys' and Girls' attitudes at the option stage.
(with Peter Littlewood)
British Journal of Language Teaching, vol. 21, no. 1, pp. 36-41.

Other Activities: Attitude survey in 6 schools; Setting policy
survey in 50 schools; teacher perceptions on the girl-boy imbalance
collected in 62 schools; lecture at Joint Council of Language
Associations conference, University of York, March.
Interview BBC Radio.

1984: Publications:

Where have all the young men gone?
Times Educational Supplement, 4-2-84.

1985: Publications:

Pupils' perceptions of foreign language learning at 13+: some gender differences. (with Julia Batters)

Educational Studies, vol. 11, no. 1, pp. 11-23.

Fixing the options: the only solution?

British Journal of Language Teaching, vol. 23, no. 2, pp. 109-110.

Other Activities: Second attitude survey in 6 schools; option questionnaire in 7 schools; lecture at Joint Council of Language Associations conference, University of Bradford, March. Lecture at Council of Europe International Workshop, Ascona, Switzerland, November.

1986: Publications:

Englishmen, Englishwomen and foreign language learning.

TESOL France, vol. 6, no. 1, January, pp. 44-46.

Sex of teacher and the image of foreign languages in schools. (with Julia Batters)

Educational Studies, vol. 12, no. 3, pp. 245-254.

Boys, Girls and Languages in Schools. London: Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research.

PREFACE

In March 1986 was published by the Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research my Information Guide on the theme of Boys, Girls and Languages in School. Aimed specifically at the language teaching profession, it was a modest attempt to convey to colleagues my anxiety about the growing imbalance between the sexes among language learners in British comprehensive schools. The gap between boys and girls is widening annually as option choices are made and examination entries and results are processed.

The concern I felt which led to the writing of that Guide and has spurred me into this new, far more ambitious project of producing a doctoral thesis on the same subject, is longstanding and constant. In my own days as a foreign language teacher I was at pains to persuade girls and boys to stay with language learning for the duration of their compulsory schooling, but I was already aware of the difficulties in stimulating equal interest among pupils of each sex. Now, as part of my work as an initial teacher trainer, I visit many schools and make a point of noting the composition of the classes and the abilities of the groups. It is rare nowadays to find boys outnumbering girls in classes preparing for public examinations; it is even unusual to find equal numbers of boys and girls. In the lower school, as soon as classes are setted according to assumed ability, there is likely to be a preponderance of girls in the top sets and,

as a consequence, the majority of boys will be in the lower sets. This situation is not new, of course, but as people strive for greater equality of educational opportunity for the sexes, questions about foreign language provision for boys and girls and the outcomes of teaching and learning for both sexes need to be considered.

The title of the Information Guide referred to above placed boys before girls. There was a good alphabetical reason for this sequence. However, some would argue that for far too long, in terms of educational needs and priorities, boys have tended to be considered first and girls second. Others, indifferent to claims that one or other sex is underperforming in some aspects of education and prone to lay accusations of sex bias against those who do make such claims, would prefer to 'leave well alone' and disclaim any responsibility. Yet, over the past ten to fifteen years, the underachievement of girls generally and in the physical sciences specifically has become the focus of attention and research. Agencies such as the Equal Opportunities Commission have made it their duty to persuade more girls that it is an unwise step to drop science subjects. The campaign to urge girls to try for careers in science and technology may not have been complemented by similar efforts to argue the case for boys studying languages, but it is a natural outcome of changing values and expectations of society. Heightened awareness of the restrictive nature of sex-stereotyping in school and work has led to genuine concern over pupils' choices of subjects in the curriculum.

However, there is a real risk, in my view, that with the increasing emphasis on science and technology for both boys and girls, the arts - and especially the language arts - will be neglected. For economic, social and cultural reasons it is important that pupils of both sexes recognise the value of a sustained course of foreign language study. Unfortunately, there is evidence to suggest that more and more pupils are abandoning language learning at the earliest opportunity.

Some would blame this state of affairs on national attitudes, attitudes which allow politicians and business people to go around the world still assuming that everyone must speak English. Then there are the media, for example television producers, who consider it necessary to provide a voice-over translation every time foreigners dare to speak their own language. Others would point to the limited scope, at least hitherto, of the A level examination system and unrealistic expectations of modern languages examination syllabuses. Questions are also raised about the quality of teaching in our schools.

Whatever the reasons -and this thesis will attempt to unravel at least some of the possible causes - the drift-away from languages is most marked among boys. The decline is quite dramatic at Advanced level, but lower down the secondary schools too there are signs that the appeal of new scientifically related subjects and vocational courses is attracting an increasing number of pupils of both sexes away from languages. So, it could be argued, it is timely to investigate why there is an imbalance between the sexes as far as

foreign languages uptake is concerned and why, in particular, boys seem less likely to number among those pupils who gain advanced qualifications.

CHAPTER ONE

BEGINNINGS

FOREWORD

This chapter presents, virtually in unadulterated form, an article written early in 1979. It represents the point at which, for the first time, I made public my views on the vexed question of sex differences in foreign language learning. Three years earlier there had been, in one of the British language teaching journals, one or two short articles dealing overtly with the topic (Beswick,1976; Van Abbé,1976) and the previous year had seen the publication of an important article highlighting attitudinal variations between the sexes (Morris,1978). This, in some measure, extended the work of the Primary French evaluation (Burstall,1970; Burstall et al., 1974) into the middle stages of secondary schooling. However, for the first time, it seems, judging from letters received and editorial reactions, many language teachers were brought face to face with the reality of examination statistics revealing the differences in outcomes of learning and levels of performance between girls and boys.

There are facets to the argument developed in the article which will be discussed further at the end of this chapter and at various points

in the thesis. The rather ingenuous and circumscribed search for evidence of biological factors affecting the different rates of attainment of the sexes especially begs comment.

SEX DIFFERENCES AND LANGUAGE LEARNING:

A REVIEW OF THE EVIDENCE

In a paper presented to the British Association for the Advancement of Science annual meeting during September 1978, Dr. Allison Kelly of the University of Manchester produced a wealth of statistical and anecdotal evidence to support the long-held suspicion of many teachers and educationists that girls, at all steps of the educational ladder, are underachieving in science, particularly the physical sciences. When a battery of tests was administered in fourteen different countries it was discovered that general underachievement was apparent in all countries. Not only were far fewer girls than boys pursuing studies in science subjects beyond the point when courses became optional, they constantly gained lower scores in all aspects of the tests. (Kelly, 1978)

There is, of course, plenty of evidence proving male superiority in spatial ability, that is, in activities in which the ability to organise and relate visual inputs in their spatial context is uppermost. The supremacy of the male of the human species in this area of cognition becomes noticeable very early in the life cycle, at

the age of three or four and it appears to be an advantage which remains constant throughout the normal period of physical and cognitive growth into adulthood. It also seems that, to some extent, this special ability is genetically determined; indeed, that the genetic message is transferred through the sex hormones. (Hutt, 1972; Maccoby and Jacklin, 1974).

However, these biological explanations cannot entirely explain the overwhelming differences in attainment in science which the international tests highlight. The gap between the sexes in the scores of tests of spatial ability is far greater than can be accounted for by biological differences alone. Equally, if not more influential, are social factors. A child is bombarded by sex-specific images from the media from infancy and from educational spheres as soon as he or she reaches school age. Parents' expectations for their children, especially in mother-daughter relationships, often reinforce this sort of subliminal programming. It is not altogether surprising that girls in, for example, Hungary and Japan fared better in the tests than their counterparts in Britain, the United States and Italy. In Western cultures, parents' and teachers' attitudes to the subjects in the secondary school curriculum tend to place science in that category of 'masculine' domains of knowledge and experience. Frighteningly, the maleness of science appears to be established very early indeed in the minds of children (Byrne, 1978; Harvey, 1980).

And now, the inevitable question: can we assume that the converse of the above is true in terms of achievement and attitudes to arts

subjects and, in particular, to language study?

Certainly, in those international studies aimed at evaluating educational achievement in French and English as foreign languages that have so far been conducted, as we might expect, girls performed better universally. (Carroll, 1975; Lewis & Massad, 1975). Girls are also far more likely to remain in classes to examinable levels.

However obvious the numerical superiority of girls may be within individual schools, one has only to study the recent official figures to prove the extent to which girls outnumber boys throughout England and Wales in public examinations in the commonly taught foreign languages.

(All tables and figures are printed in Volume 2 of this thesis. Headings only are provided within the text of Volume 1.)

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF CANDIDATES IN CSE EXAMINATIONS:

1973-77

TABLE 2: NUMBER OF CANDIDATES IN 'O' LEVEL EXAMINATIONS:

1973-77

TABLE 3: NUMBER OF CANDIDATES IN 'A' LEVEL EXAMINATIONS:

1973-77

These statistics refer to summer examinations only.

Much disappointing information could be extrapolated from the numbers, especially with regard to Advanced level entries where even apparent stability in numbers means a real decline. However, my immediate concern is simply to point out that in all these foreign language examinations girls outnumber boys by substantial margins, often in the ratio of 2:1 and, in some cases, even by as much as 3:1.

The next question to ask is whether, in fact, girls have any biological advantage over boys in this area of the curriculum (as boys may have for science); some innate capacity to excel in the language arts?

International tests in modern language achievement carried out at the same time as those for science provided ample data for researchers to be able to state not only that second language learning is dominated by women numerically but that attitudinal dispositions tend to provide them with the necessary motivation to attain better grades, however these are measured.

Further analysis of this country's public examination results reveals the same sort of evidence. A gender spectrum based on 'O' level entries in 1972 (Ormerod, 1975), shows that, by taking the majority sex for each subject, French and the second foreign language provided in schools appear well within the 'female' arc.

TABLE 4: THE GENDER SPECTRUM OF SCHOOL SUBJECTS

Ormerod suggests that the requirements of university entrance looming on the horizon make the overall picture for French, English and possibly Latin seem more 'male' than would normally be the case based on preference alone. The removal of a foreign language as a general matriculation requirement for entry into higher education has, indeed, created a greater imbalance over the years since that gender spectrum was designed. The critical ratio referred to in Table 4 is derived by applying the Mann-Whitney U test as an index of the magnitude of the difference in preference between the two sexes.

To illustrate the differing levels of attainment in the examinations is not altogether an easy task. In the case of the CSE results, reference can be made to those pupils gaining Grade 1. These are identified in the official statistics for obvious reasons. In Ordinary and Advanced levels, only the overall percentage of passes is registered.

TABLE 5: PERCENTAGE OF GRADE 1 PASSES IN CSE LANGUAGES:

1973-76

TABLE 6: PERCENTAGE OF PASSES, ALL GRADES, IN 'O' LEVEL LANGUAGES:

1973-77

TABLE 7: PERCENTAGE OF PASSES, ALL GRADES, IN 'A' LEVEL LANGUAGES:

1973-77

Comparisons between the examination performances of boys and girls can be misleading. It must be remembered that the population of girls taking the exams is more highly selected than the boys, particularly at Advanced level. Many more boys than girls remain in school beyond the statutory leaving age. In the summer examinations of 1976, candidature in all subjects comprised 303,692 boys as opposed to 224,604 girls. Girls who stay on for sixth-form studies, even in the arts, are more likely to be highly motivated and academically able. Nevertheless, the gap in achievement levels, apart from one or two exceptions in German, is wide enough to be of more than passing interest and the sum result is the reinforcement of the impression that there does exist a special female capacity to succeed in foreign language learning.

Just as boys are superior to girls in measurements of spatial ability, so girls excel in virtually all aspects of linguistic processes; in speech skills, including clarity and fluency, in reading, in spelling skills (Hutt, 1972; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974). It must always be borne in mind that boys display far greater variability in tests measuring intelligence or cognition, however, in large samples, girls and women have consistently better scores in verbal skills, notably in tests of short-term memory, speed and deftness. This superiority manifests itself in infancy and while there may be no appreciable difference between the sexes during the middle years of childhood, the female adolescent has a distinct advantage over her male contemporary in the verbal skills. Remedial

reading classes contain, on average, four times as many boys as girls.

The above statements refer, naturally, to special abilities in the mother tongue. There has been relatively little research into biological factors influencing performance in second language acquisition. Fortunately though, as part of her massive study of French in the Primary school, Burstall (1968;1970;1974) wisely considered it appropriate to analyse her findings in terms of achievements and attitudes by sex. Her results replicated, to a large degree, those of an earlier study based on young children learning Spanish, (Johnson et al., 1963) in which girls reached significantly higher levels of achievement than boys. While Burstall advises that her findings should not be interpreted as an indication that girls are 'in some mysterious way better endowed than boys to reach a high level of achievement when they attempt to learn a foreign language', (Burstall, 1974,p.30) one cannot help speculating that something more than just social factors are involved. Moreover, recent developments in psychological research invite one to question further her disclaimer, at least in so far as ability to identify and manipulate items of the mother tongue is deemed applicable to second-language learning.

It would appear that there are fundamental differences between the sexes in certain psycholinguistic and neurological functions. In a series of American experiments a number of male and female students aged 18-21 were tested on visual and auditory search tasks. They were

required to locate either a target letter or a target sound, (McGuinness & Pribram, 1978). While the men did not differ from the women in their ability to locate a sound in a word presented visually, in purely auditory tasks the women showed a marked tendency to respond faster in all tests; in matching sounds to words, they were vastly superior. The data specifically indicated that the common deficiency in spelling by males is due, most likely, to incorrect perception of an auditory signal and an inability to form or to assess a visual representation while operating in an auditory mode.

These findings are open to challenge, of course, and until similar experiments are carried out with larger samples and across different age ranges we are left only with one more ponderable. Could there be a significant neuro-physiological difference between the sexes which affects psycholinguistic functions?

Certainly social, cultural and now possibly biological factors can be said to weigh heavily on the young male adolescent who decides to continue a course of foreign language learning. His task is made all the more difficult by the imposition of inappropriate forms of instruction due largely to the perpetuation of obsolete or irrelevant modes of assessment. For example, boys' progress might even be negatively influenced by the current, seemingly sensible stress on aural comprehension and, after the audio-visual revolution in modern language teaching methodology during the sixties and seventies, the conventional reluctance of teachers to introduce written equivalents of spoken passages and dialogues too soon in the learning sequence.

If the research described above has any validity, boys need perhaps far more than girls an immediate, if not simultaneous reinforcement of the visual cue (the written word) with the auditory signal (the new foreign word spoken).

I would also venture to suggest that for different methodological and organisational reasons girls, too, are under-performing in foreign language learning, despite the fact that the natural and social balance appears to be tipped in their favour. Let me give one example. It is possible that boys and girls might benefit, both psychologically and academically, by being placed in single-sex groups for foreign languages at the crucial ages of 13-15 years. It is small wonder that so few boys fulfil early promise when their classmates of the opposite sex display more aptitude and confidence, and are generally subject to fewer inhibitions regarding speech tasks during adolescence.

In the early years of schooling, when great emphasis is laid on verbal skills, differences between the sexes may not be quite so apparent. However, the continuation of mixed classes for languages (and even the retention of static age groups) might, in reality, check the progress of the girls in the age group. Boys in single-sex classes could benefit from some form of compensatory programme of work while girls could be given an accelerated course at a time when their more advanced development in the language faculties is most prominent. If girls were ready for examinations earlier by this means, time would be available for more assistance to be given in

those mathematical and scientific areas of the curriculum where, we are told, girls are disadvantaged.

Some schools consider it a wise initiative to advance girls' candidature in some public examinations by one year, in the belief that they will perform better at that age, that is, before social sex-stereotyping causes them to lower their academic aspirations. In my experience, many girls are ready for first examinations in a foreign language before the age of sixteen.

However unnatural or undesirable it may appear to separate the sexes for specific sectors of their education, the evidence available to date would suggest that setting by sex is beneficial, at least on the basis of increased positive attitudes to foreign language learning by both sexes. In one experiment involving setting by sex in the second and third years of a mixed comprehensive school in Oxfordshire, although it is too early yet to evaluate progress by means of public examination results, it does seem that there is an immediate improvement in termly test results by pupils in segregated groups. At the end of year two, the results of the single-sex groups were considerably better than those of the co-educational groups in comparison with their performance in their first year in mixed ability co-ed classes. This improvement was particularly marked among the boys. In the words of one of the teachers involved:

'My overall impression is that motivation, attitude, work, behaviour and competence all improve when pupils are taught languages in segregated classes, provided that a proper match of teacher personality and group is made.'

This is by no means an objective appraisal of the situation, of course. What we need now are more scientifically controlled experiments along these lines in an attempt to discover the extent to which the apparent advantages are real.

Psycholinguistics is in its infancy. Until more is known of the cognitive processes involved in learning a second language as opposed to acquiring language, it is almost inevitable that boys and girls will fail to reach their full potential in the language arts as rapidly and as efficiently as they might.

Formalised foreign language instruction, by whatever method one cares to name, has never really guaranteed success. For centuries educationists have dabbled with methods with only the most superficial knowledge of what it is that enables Man and Woman to acquire language in the first place and knowing next to nothing about how a second language can be assimilated eight, eleven or even sixteen years after the brain receives its first mother-tongue messages. When human understanding of these complex processes is substantially expanded, I suspect that it will eventually be taken for granted that, at least when it is a question of mastering a foreign language, boys and girls differ dramatically in their learning strategies and in their 'material' needs.

DISCUSSION

The wisdom of hindsight and a much more extensive, though by no means comprehensive knowledge of the field, provide me with several points for discussion arising out of this article.

At the time of writing, in common with many other commentators, I was still undecided about the relative merits of the two sides in the nurture-nature debate as they might affect sex differences in educational attainment. It is all too obvious that I relied unduly on what appeared then to be authoritative works, especially those reporting large numbers of empirical research studies such as Maccoby & Jacklin (1974). (A more critical consideration of this text appears in Chapter 4). Certainly the tide of opinion has changed dramatically since the mid-seventies, with researchers and research reviewers tending much more frequently to explain sex differences in verbal and spatial performance with reference to sex-role expectations rather than dwelling on biological predispositions.

One of the inherent risks of concentrating attention on sex differences in the academic spheres is that the subjects under study become themselves labelled as sex-specific, thus increasing the likelihood of sex-appropriate behaviours in learners. It has regularly been proved that children and adults will tend to monitor their own performance in accordance with the sex-specific labels

assigned to a task (Kagan, 1964; Montemayor, 1974). As expected, performance improves when a same-sex label is applied, or thought to apply. Even when a free choice of activities is offered, eleven year boys choose to work longer and more diligently on those things which they perceive to be male-appropriate, less on 'neutral' tasks and least of all on 'female' tasks. In contrast, girls spend an equal amount of time on all three types (Stein et al., 1971).

It is tempting to ask how boys and girls aged eleven approach the task of learning a foreign language in their first weeks in the secondary school. Even if languages are somehow regarded as neutral territory initially, it could be that boys soon apply themselves less assiduously than girls because they feel it their duty to concentrate their efforts on those curriculum subjects which already have a strong masculine label, such as practical subjects and science. There is certainly scope for a study into pupils' gender-based presuppositions of the process of learning a foreign language at secondary school, especially in the light of my own results reported in Chapters 6 and 8 which contradict the commonly view that languages are labelled according to gender stereotypes.

Foreign language learning is a complex and multi-faceted process, involving a wide range of different skills. It is possible that whereas languages en masse are not viewed as sex-specific by boys and girls, they may suffer from gender labelling in those elements that concern language as reading-matter; here, there is apparently more likelihood of sex-related differences in attitude and performance.

These may still be the result of females being more advanced developmentally or because males perceive schools generally and reading specifically as sex-role appropriate for females.

Dwyer (1974) dismisses the first hypothesis, arguing that similar advantages over boys should be shown by girls across the cognitive domains, including spatial abilities in which, on the contrary, they have been found wanting at the pre-adolescent stage. However, in American society, Dwyer finds some justification for arguing that reading is viewed as a feminine activity and this classification has the effect of lessening boys' motivation to excel in reading. It has to be admitted that the values of British society do not differ substantially from those found across the Atlantic. Reading may not be a taboo subject for boys in Britain, but my reference to boys' remedial needs in the article still holds good seven years later; and while it is impossible to assign direct causal relations between sex-role interpretations and verbal performance, there is plenty of room for conjecture.

There is also, fortunately, room for hope as far as foreign language education is concerned. Language teaching methods have not stood still. Many teachers now adopt what may be described loosely as a multi-media communicative approach. Two important consequences need to be mentioned here briefly.

Firstly, no single language skill should dominate in classroom activities. Indeed, new proposals for assessment in first

examinations at 16+ reinforce the need for equal weighting to be given to the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing.

Secondly, individual learning styles should stand a much better chance of being satisfied by the less dogmatic approach that has developed over recent years. In particular, problem-solving activities which have long-since been classified in the literature on cognitive sex differences as 'masculine' (Milton, 1957;1959), are an essential ingredient of truly communicative language teaching methods.

One thing that must be acknowledged in this afterthought on my writing of 1979 is that, while it is fascinating to speculate on the applicability of specific research studies to one's own field of interest, the temptation to infer relevance may not always have been resisted. For example, so many of the tests of verbal and spatial ability, including the work of McGuinness et al, have been carried out among age groups and cultural milieu that are different from those of the subjects which will form the main focus of my own investigations later. Much more cross-cultural data is needed to substantiate the universality of researchers' claims and, I have yet to discover any longitudinal studies involving large populations which might help ascertain the effects of sex-role definitions on cognitive functioning.

However, despite these limitations, I am far more inclined to believe that the social reinforcement hypothesis, or a version of it, is the

key to greater understanding of why girls reject and underperform in the sciences and boys drop out of foreign language classes. Kelly (1985) concluded that the argument that science is masculine, numerically and in terms of a 'world view', because of some biological sex difference is highly contentious. I will echo this judgement when I explore in greater detail the question of innate sex differences in language learning in Chapter 4 & 5. I am similarly interested in the values that society in general and schools in particular place upon human activities and the study of them in an educational context. For even if boys fail to acknowledge it overtly, they are conforming to sex-typed behaviour by avoiding a foreign language in the options pools that schools offer them. At the same time, however, girls are being urged to step out of the mould by abandoning conventionally-typed feminine knowledge and being less selective in terms of career orientation.

One possible school initiative referred to in the article which draws attention to the different needs of the sexes and attempts to cater for these is the creation of single-sex groupings within the mixed school. During the past few years there have been several experiments along these lines in the science subjects and mathematics and some have been the subject of evaluation (Kelly, 1981; Smith, 1984; Whyte, 1985). To the best of my knowledge there have been no similar projects in foreign languages save that reported in Batters (1987). The case referred to in 1979 was short-lived so no long-term conclusions could be drawn. Language teachers seem reluctant to re-arrange their teaching to allow further research of this kind to

be carried out.

One final comment is necessary: as the status of foreign languages has declined even further as the need to present a language at entry into higher education has diminished, languages have undoubtedly moved more to the right (the female side) along the gender spectrum of subjects. Sex-related differences in the perception of the usefulness of school subjects for higher qualifications and adult life have frequently been found in connection with mathematics (Hilton & Bergland, 1974) and science (Fox, 1976) and other curricular areas (Pratt et al., 1984). To these findings I shall be able to add new data relating specifically to foreign languages.

CHAPTER TWO

THE IMAGE AND CONTEXT OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

FOREWORD

In April and May 1981, a small scale survey of attitudes to French among third-formers was carried out in two comprehensive schools. The survey was made in two distinct phases. The first involved the piloting of a questionnaire and attitude scale in one school with subsequent computer analysis of results. The second entailed using the same attitude scale but included a slightly modified questionnaire and improved computer treatment of the data. The questionnaires were designed and administered by myself and Peter Littlewood, an M.Ed degree student whose dissertation I was supervising at the time. He subsequently wrote up his results in that dissertation as part fulfilment of his degree requirements. We also collaborated during this same period on the writing of two articles, both of which were published (Powell & Littlewood, 1982; 1983). The first article, written almost entirely by myself, was intended and proved to be a provocative piece. The second article, to which I contributed various sections, included a brief, formal, objective report on the main findings of the attitude survey together with a discussion of the results. Here, too, strong opinions were voiced.

This chapter of the thesis draws upon those sections of the original draft of the first article written by myself. I have also included one or two paragraphs from among those that I contributed to the second article.

FOREIGN LANGUAGES: THE AVOIDABLE OPTIONS

In the autumn of 1973, Her Majesty's Inspectors were requested by Government to undertake a study of 'the extent to which curricular differences and customs contributed to inequality of opportunity for boys and girls'. The survey of secondary schools in England encompassed a 10% sample of maintained schools, statistically representative of the different sizes and types of secondary schools across the country, including single-sex and mixed schools.

It was inevitable that the resulting publication, Education Survey no. 21 (HMI, 1975), should contain several pages of description of and comment on the effects of option systems. It is also to be regretted that this has not been the most widely read of reports emanating from the Inspectorate.

The tables of statistics showing percentages of pupils being offered, choosing and taking particular subjects in the fourth and fifth years did not exactly offer encouragement to those concerned about foreign

language education. They revealed pretty starkly the unpopularity of French and German, especially as far as the boys were concerned. In the 447 schools in the survey, French was taken by only 24% of the boys and 40% of the girls. Of these pupils only a proportion would eventually obtain an examination pass.

Even a cursory glance at more recent DES statistics showing the number of entries at public examination for French and other languages would indicate that, were a similar survey of option choices to be carried out today, the figures would look rather similar. In other words, there would have been no increase in line with the growing population. Furthermore, pressure on the curriculum from within and without has resulted in far fewer children being offered the chance to begin the study of a second foreign language such as German or Spanish.

The statistical results of the survey also gave clear evidence of the polarisation effect that the option stage creates with regard to the assumed masculinity of the sciences, physics especially, and the apparent femininity of languages, both at the stage the different subjects are offered to pupils for selection and as a result of that selection process.

TABLE 8: RESULTS OF OPTION CHOICES IN FIVE SUBJECTS:

1973

Of course the trends established at the end of the third year become

even more pronounced in the sixth-form. As a result, only a handful of boys (8% in the HMI survey) pursued Advanced level courses in French and even fewer in German (3%). The corresponding figures for girls were 24% studying French and 9% German.

The opportunities for early specialisation that the option stage provides in many British schools are, without doubt, counter-productive if we believe that the study of a foreign language should be an integral part of most children's balanced curriculum. It may seem paradoxical to say so, but the system of options, far from providing all children who show interest, ability or determination in a particular subject with the choice to pursue it until the statutory school leaving age, actually pressurizes parents, teachers and pupils into making forced, sometimes unwise decisions based on false assumptions about the nature of schooling and society.

While society has evolved considerably over the past twenty years, schools seem not to have taken full account of the changing patterns of economic and social life. The set of values that governs any form of curricular structure is usually tacit. These values will include, however, permitted behaviour patterns, forms of interaction between adults and young people, uses of authority, communications between the school and the outside world and, of considerable relevance to us here, the roles of the sexes. In the words of the conclusion to the HMI survey:

'The prevailing picture is of traditional assumptions being worked out through the curricular patterns of secondary schools, and of support for and acceptance of these patterns by the majority of teachers, parents and pupils. It may be that society can justify the

striking differences that exist between the subjects studied by boys and girls in secondary schools, but it is more likely that a society that needs to develop to the full the talents and skills of all its people will find the discrepancies disturbing.' (HMI, 1975, p.24)

In many schools, over ten years after this survey, the curriculum, overt and covert, is founded still on a philosophy in which traditional, now inappropriate, ideas about the 'proper' spheres of men and women predominate. Poor organisation of the option system or ill-conceived advice leading up to the moment of decision can increase the likelihood of sex-stereotyping in schools. When pupils are presented, as they sometimes are, with the stark choice between a language or a science, there is little doubt that the majority of boys will seek to advance their scientific knowledge at the expense of their languages.

If teachers are convinced of the importance of foreign languages in schools, then they must accept responsibility for and the consequences of a language being present in the curriculum of all pupils from the age of eleven to sixteen, as is the situation in most countries on the continent. Before that happens, teachers will need to have more confidence in the validity of their reasons for taking up that share of curricular time and scarce resources.

There is also some justification for acquiring a language of one or more of our many ethnic minority communities. If this were to occur, the possibilities for real communication could be greater than for some European languages. The opportunities to gain insights into different cultures - an oft-cited goal for foreign language learning

- are right on the doorstep. An understanding of cultural diversity is vitally important in a pluralistic society such as ours but schools still emulate the nineteenth century public school curriculum by giving pride of place to that former 'language of diplomacy', French.

The 1975 Education survey did not generate the sustained and productive discussion that it merited. It may have provided useful data in the debate about girls and science education which had been gathering momentum during the early seventies but it did little at the time to contribute to an awareness of the other dimension of inequality of opportunity, that is, boys and foreign languages. Furthermore, it is disturbing that later documents on the secondary school curriculum do not seem to have taken account of the disparity between the sexes regarding the arts in general and languages in particular. The DES pamphlet The School Curriculum (1981), for example, in its three paragraphs devoted to modern languages, while recognising the decline in popularity and suggesting ten questions for further study, makes no reference to the imbalance of the sexes.

It is time for all who have a responsibility for and an interest in foreign language education to face up to the truth: languages are attracting fewer and fewer pupils in a declining school population and especially among male 13-14 year olds, they are regularly grouped among the most unpopular subjects of study.

In any study of the linguistic, psychological and pedagogical aspects

of the language drop-out problem, the pupil perspective must be given far greater prominence than has hitherto been the case. Naturally no pupil is going to risk her or his chances in a subject that appears to be more difficult than the majority of those on offer. The backlash effect of the present 16+ examinations does not only affect teaching styles and the content of lessons (NCLE, 1980), the constant image created in the minds of young people about to make their selection of subjects to study in the third and fourth years is one of a subject in which very few excel, and those who do are mostly the girls.

When studies have been conducted into the comparability of standards across the subjects, these have tended to add weight to the argument made time and time again by language teachers that their examinations are more difficult relative to many others.

Kelly, whose writings on the issue of girls and science have added much fuel in that debate, in a carefully controlled analysis of the standards of nine subjects in the Scottish O and H grades during the years 1969-75, found French and German consistently near or at the top of the league table of difficulty. The English results over a similar period, derived from Nuttall (1974) form the second half of Table 9.

TABLE 9: THE AVERAGE RANK ORDER OF DIFFICULTY OF NINE
SUBJECTS IN SCOTTISH O AND H GRADE EXAMINATIONS
AND ENGLISH GCE AND CSE EXAMINATIONS

In these comparability studies, there was a strong positive correlation between the difficulty of the subject and the ability of the candidates. Admittedly, this is rather a restricted way of defining the difficulty of a particular subject, but it serves to highlight one element that contributes to a negative impression of languages in schools. For too long both CSE and GCE standards have been unrealistically demanding. The overwhelming preponderance of candidates of above average ability skews the population distribution without, however, a corresponding easing of the pass rate norms. Within the CSE framework, the plethora of Mode 3 schemes (Moys et al, 1980), points to teachers' dissatisfaction and their search for more realistic targets for their pupils. Grade 1 in CSE is a reward reserved to few, while Grade 4 could in no way be said to represent the level of performance of the average candidate. Criterion referencing and the closer definition of syllabuses, together with a more appropriate register of language and range of tasks must be included in any discussion leading to the establishment of new language examinations.

There is now a noticeable, annual decline in the numbers of able boys offering languages at examination level. The role expectation of boys in life is that of husbands and providers. This will lead them into making instrumental choices regarding their subjects of study for examination purposes. For the young male, science is made prominent. The applicability of the sciences and their direct relevance to career orientation make their inclusion in the list of chosen

subjects almost inevitable. Despite recent advances in women's emancipation, the predominant role for a girl is still seen to be that of wife and mother. Paradoxically, this constricting, stereotypical view of womanhood offers a girl greater academic freedom. Hence, a neglect of the sciences and the acceptance that languages, if they appear to be useful at all in the world of work, may have some value allied to commercial, clerical or secretarial skills - traditionally, jobs for the girls.

In the short term, only the presence of a foreign language in the core curriculum 11-16 would 'catch' enough able boys to produce a more normal distribution of good examination results for both sexes. However, at present, any review of national or regional foreign language examination results tends to add to the aura of femininity surrounding languages.

It must be stressed that the results themselves add nothing to our understanding of the process of teaching and learning nor the influences on young people at the decisive moment of choice of the subjects to take to examination level. Neither do the results in themselves support the claim that languages are 'girls' subjects', inherently feminine. They merely show that more boys than girls opt out of languages for reasons that could have nothing to do with a perception of the subject as feminine on the part of pupils. There is a grave risk that banner headlines such as 'BOYS THINK LANGUAGES ARE ALL GIRLS' TALK', which appeared in a Guardian article reporting the Modern Language Association submission to a Parliamentary Select

Committee in May 1981, may actually cause considerable adverse publicity for the cause of equal opportunities. Overt labelling of languages as 'female' activities may deter yet more male students from opting freely, mindful, that is, of educational and vocational arguments for retaining a language.

If it were true that boys did, in fact, opt out of languages for fear of being seen as effeminate, then solutions to the drop-out problem would be far simpler. Counter advice and counselling, designed especially to raise the status of the subject in the eyes of boys, could be forwarded. So far, however, there is little or no evidence to suggest that boys' attitudes to French, for example, are limited to notions of gender-applicability of the subject. In reality, the issue is far more complex. Let me illustrate.

In a pilot research project conducted in two mixed comprehensive schools, a small-scale survey of attitudes to French among third-year pupils produced a number of interesting results. (Powell & Littlewood, 1983). More details of the analysis are also provided in Chapter 6, Part 1. Important sex differences were revealed, especially with regard to future career aspirations and the effect of these on attitudes to the language.

One part of the questionnaire invited the pupils to state what kind of work they imagined themselves doing when they left school. The boys appeared to envisage themselves either in professional careers where foreign language ability was not an obvious prerequisite, or,

at the other end of the scale, in unskilled jobs where the need to use a foreign language was, at best, likely to occur very rarely indeed. Boys who opted for professional jobs might have been conscious of the need to offer French as a subject at O level as an entry qualification for selected professions, but, given that the majority of boys in these two schools saw themselves as non-professional in future job status, it would seem that at least one of the most obvious reasons for boys' low option figures is the fact that a language is, by and large, irrelevant in the foreseeable future.

On the other hand, the overall attitude of the girls towards French was significantly more conducive to success than that of the boys. The girls would exploit this positive approach by choosing to study the subject in the fourth year in large numbers. Girls expressed a liking for French per se, but they also saw it as a necessary subject for jobs. Yet it is here that a real paradox emerges which emphasises the complexity and subtlety of the influences on young people at a crucial stage in their education.

There is a general awareness in society of the need for foreign language skills in some secretarial or clerical jobs, albeit in far fewer than is popularly believed. But many of these girls had cited jobs as likely destinations in which the usefulness of a foreign language was arguable, certainly not essential. For example, in the two schools, an amazing number of them had expressed a desire to work with animals, usually horses. This overriding desire to be

engaged in an occupation involving animals cannot be dismissed as entirely stereotypical wishful thinking or the result of a predilection for ponies in girls' literature. The schools were located in two small country towns where many such jobs actually existed. Could it be that girls saw French as a potentially useful job for a girl; one that they might be expected to have pursued until the age of sixteen, whatever their eventual career orientation might be? Girls may be opting out of languages less than boys because they have been influenced by suggestions all around them that girls would find more opportunities to use a language in the sorts of jobs girls are expected to do. In other words, the sex-stereotyping of the occupations in society has succeeded in making girls accept a course of study in the belief that a successful examination result in that subject might be useful, whereas, in reality, it is dubious that many chances will exist for them to exercise those precise skills in many of the jobs that girls have in mind at the moment of choice, or, indeed, in the work that they finally take up.

In order to provide a framework for discussion and suggestions for further research, the remainder of this article focuses on some aspects of the language learning and teaching process that are considered to be crucial in any analysis of the drop-out problem in general and how it specifically underlines differences between the sexes. The issues that are raised here are not planned in any special

order, nor would I claim them to be exhaustive. I stress that they represent a personal attempt to consider that part of the curriculum occupied by foreign languages from the pupils' viewpoint.

Firstly there are those that we may classify as Intrinsic Difficulties. These bear on the nature of the subject and involve matters of methodology. I have already indicated that a foreign language appears to pupils to be more demanding than many other subjects. Evidence of successful language learning is singularly lacking inside school and in society in general. However well a pupil progresses, it is often painfully obvious that the knowledge acquired during school lessons falls considerably short of mastery. Even with modern approaches, the communicative activities that occupy so much of lesson-time bear little resemblance to real communication. Several writers have drawn the distinction between classroom 'reality' and real 'reality'; or in some definitions 'situational realism' and 'linguistic realism' (Masden & Bowen, 1978; Murray, 1983).

However well-organised and appealing the activities are, learners may still feel that their inarticulacy, their vulnerability to embarrassment by constant correction of errors, the gulf that separates their communicative needs from their communicative competence, put them at a distinct disadvantage.

During puberty, when the maintaining of a positive self-image is such a vital concern for young people, pupils can so easily resent being

exposed to possible ridicule in the public arena of the classroom, notwithstanding the care and sensitivity with which teachers arrange classroom dialogue and role-play. Boys especially may manifest their resentment with displays of aggression, hostility of protest. Who can really blame them when they feel they are being coerced into behaving in ways that are for them beneath the dignity of their age?

One result of the introduction of largely oral-based methods could be that the emphasis on repetition, question and answer sequences and pattern practice has discouraged rather than motivated some pupils. While girls may conform more readily to teacher requests for responses, boys object more strongly to being asked to involve themselves in what they may deem to be meaningless chatter. Differences between the sexes may not be so marked during the first year of learning, but already by the end of the second year, as the processes of puberty take their course, boys' reluctance often becomes increasingly noticeable.

In some of the more difficult teaching situations, these negative feelings may coincide with an 'anti-achievement' cult prevalent among some adolescent pupils, especially boys (Willis, 1977). Not only do some pupils not wish to participate for personal, emotional reasons, the desire not to comply with teachers' wishes can be converted into a positive stance (negative, of course, for the teacher) to which all pupils, under the influence of peer-group pressure are expected to conform. It may demand real courage on the part of a pupil to behave visibly in accordance with the wishes of

the establishment - here, represented by the language teacher - by showing interest in the lesson and even producing an answer occasionally. The most serious manifestation of the effect of the anti-school pupil sub-culture is the breakdown in communications between teacher and class. In the context of foreign language teaching and learning, dependent to such a great extent on oral interaction and active class participation, the effects of this reticence or destructive inattention can range from the disheartening to the disastrous.

The above scenario is, perhaps, an overstatement of the difficulty that some teachers face while attempting to teach a language to unmotivated pupils. In my experience, however, it does, in varying degrees, afflict many teachers, especially as pupils near the time when they realise they may soon be allowed to drop the subject entirely.

Language learning is a cumulative process. Although contemporary approaches tend to minimise the linear nature of language acquisition, it soon becomes apparent to pupils that knowledge gained (or lost) during the early phases is essential to successful progress later on, whether short or long-term objectives apply. In many school subjects it is the overall experience of learning that teachers possibly value more than the retention of knowledge gained as a result of the 'discoveries' made during the learning experience. With languages, however, it is the developing competence that is rewarded, competence that has to be demonstrated; it cannot be taken for

granted.

It is a competence, moreover, that can only increase in the measure by which learners are able to retain in the mind the sounds and patterns of the language to which they are exposed and are able to add constantly to that store of knowledge. Then, of course, linguistic knowledge must also be able to be retrieved and re-used when necessary and appropriate. In short, mastery of a language depends heavily on the possession or the development of a good short-term memory and long-term memory. While it may be claimed that this form of learning is applicable to a number of subjects, it is surely in the foreign language lesson that the pupil is called upon most frequently to memorise and recall and where errors or forgetfulness are most in evidence.

Languages suffer, as do other arts subjects in which learning through talk is an important ingredient of lesson time, from the common notion among children that in school 'work' is synonymous with 'writing'. Other activities, by comparison acquire lower status. Talking, after all, is never used by teachers as a control device, whereas writing is set as a serious task and virtually always assessed. It is therefore hardly surprising that pupils fail sometimes to see the value of learning through talking. There is often no visible, no tangible result for all that verbal activity. Boys might well prefer to be doing, manipulating and writing things down rather than just listening, repeating or answering questions to which nobody really needs to know the answer or to which the answer

is already known. They probably accept as more valid, within the negotiated and accepted framework of classroom activities, those tasks which make demands on their manual, organisational or problem-solving skills.

This leads me on to a consideration of the contents of the foreign language syllabus which so often offers very few opportunities below sixth-form level to deal in matters that pupils can relate easily to their everyday lives. The irrelevance and inappropriateness of the language and situations used to assess pupils in public examinations at 16+ have already been demonstrated with vigour elsewhere (Moys et al., 1980). Many children probably find the course materials leading to the examinations less than stimulating. At a time when pupils in the third year of secondary school are building their own electric motors and coming to terms with complex geographical concepts such as hierarchies of settlement and population distribution, what is the subject-matter of their language lessons? Could it be that the preponderance of topics such as the home, shopping, food, clothing, animals, the weather etc., in so many syllabuses acts as a disincentive, especially to boys, who may prefer to spend their time on more overtly masculine areas of interest?

My last comment on the intrinsic problems, based, admittedly, as so many of the points in this chapter, more on observation, hearsay and speculation than on empirical evidence, is connected with the gender characteristics and appeal of particular languages. It is often suggested that boys respond more positively to the guttural,

'robust' nature of German than to Romance languages. In one study among American college students, males certainly expressed many more favourable sentiments about German than French or Spanish (Ludwig, 1983). In this country, the research done by Phillips (Phillips, 1982; Phillips & Stencel, 1983) confirms this impression. An additional difficulty, therefore, for French and Spanish teachers may be that of combatting pupils' irrational perceptions of the languages themselves. Divesting them, if possible, of associations with an effete life style or crude stereotypes could reduce the risks of alienating pupils from the language itself.

Were German to be offered on a more widespread basis as first foreign language the enthusiasm seen in first year classes might be sustained for longer and to a similar degree by both sexes. However, the reports of recent studies of schools offering languages other than French as first foreign language, hinted that organisational difficulties of these alternative policies of provision were sometimes formidable. (Hadley, 1981; Modern Languages Committee, 1982).

The second category of factors which have a bearing on the drop-out problem and the disparity between the sexes is one that could bear the label Extrinsic. These factors arise out of the nature of the organisation and management of foreign language learning in schools.

Firstly, it is clear that any apparent difference in performance between the sexes in the first three years of secondary schooling are likely to affect the outcome of any selection system at the end of year three. Similarly, a negative experience of foreign language learning in the first three years will automatically mean smaller second language groups in the fourth year, unless an element of compulsion is applied. In the mixed ability class, differences in performance between pupils should be minimised. But if whole class teaching predominates, those differences will, on the contrary, tend to be heightened.

Pupils seem to gain the impression fairly soon that success in language learning is dependent, in some way, on being 'brainy'. As soon as setting occurs, usually in the second year, but in some schools even earlier, the connections made in pupils' minds between intelligence and all round ability in languages becomes even more firmly fixed. However well disguised the hierarchical structure of the sets is, pupils very quickly ascertain their position relative to those above and below, and thereafter perform according to their perception of the appropriate rate of work and, regrettably, to underestimated expectations of potential on the part of their teachers.

Boys outnumber girls in remedial reading classes and generally experience more difficulties with language skills in the lower school. It is quite usual to see girls outnumbering boys in the top sets for languages, the selection procedure for the sets being

frequently applied through the use of norm-referenced tests alone. Once those top sets are established with a majority of girls in situ, it automatically cuts down the chances of an equal number of boys obtaining high grades. It undoubtedly reduces considerably the numbers of boys being entered for O and A level examinations. Those who do elect to continue with a language in the fourth year may not have been in receipt of 'top set teaching' for the previous two years, thereby being further disadvantaged.

It is known to me that in some schools, the language departments, having taken cognizance of the risks of creating an artificial division between the sexes in this way, tend to disregard raw scores of pupils from tests and consider a pupil's potential by all round performance. In doing so they form sets in which the distribution of boys and girls is far more even. Other schools prefer to delay setting or leave broader bands of ability for longer. In the long run, having to teach less homogeneous classes for the first three years is a small price to pay if the uptake in year four is greater. This is, after all the normal arrangement for classes in many other countries. At present, boys, who generally mature later than girls anyway, are missing their chance to develop their language skills to the full because they have been adjudged too early to be inferior to the high fliers in set one, so often composed almost entirely by girls.

Early setting also tends to emphasise the fact that success in a language is somehow dependent on the social class of the learner. A

review of parental occupations of top set pupils in the survey referred to above produced the expected array of professional or white collar jobs. This is true of other subjects, of course, but usually it is only Maths and languages that set pupils into ability groups so early.

Accusations of élitism are difficult to counter. Pupils are probably not unaware of the accident of high status jobs done by parents of top-set children, and they draw their own conclusions from that knowledge. Children of unskilled or manual workers on low wages, already disadvantaged educationally, can so easily find the challenge of learning a foreign language too much for them and so abandon hope. Besides, it seems not to be a skill in great demand in their sphere of life, save for the occasional trans-Europe lorry-driver.

Pupils do not solely depend on peer-analysis for an evaluation of their progress. They rely on teacher feedback, by way of reward, encouragement, comments, oral and written, and the inevitable marks and grades. It has been suggested by more than one writer that one possible cause of girls failing to do well in science has its origins in the way the teachers, in the majority male, behave towards them during lessons, i.e. tending to neglect them and favour boys with their attention. (Kelly, 1981; Spender, 1982; Stanworth, 1983). Naturally, the converse does not automatically follow: that girls receive more attention from female language teachers. However, the subtle influences of teacher praise and admonishment should not be overlooked. Girls may dominate oral lessons for reasons suggested

earlier in this chapter and therefore receive more positive reinforcement for their efforts. Although there is, as yet, no proof for the supposition, it could be that the numerical superiority of women in the language teaching profession, does not serve to enhance the image of languages for boys about to make their option choices.

In the first three years of secondary school, much of the written work that is assessed is fairly basic. Pupils' books in the lower school are filled with pictorial features, dutifully coloured and labelled. The exercises set for pupils are largely repetitive and include a high proportion of copy-writing. Boys, in my experience, seem less anxious to please teachers with displays of their artistic or calligraphic talents whereas many girls take a certain pride in producing neatly written, tidily set-out and colourful work. Naturally they receive praise and good grades for their efforts. The cumulative effect of these marks or grades can be to raise girls' standards relative to the boys in the same class and thereby enhance their chances of success in the longer term. In an analysis of coursework boys may come off second best and the risk is that they consider themselves, thereafter, to be second best.

In this chapter an attempt has been made to observe the subject known as French, German or Spanish etc., from the viewpoint of the pupils 'at the receiving end'. The result has not been a comfortable picture

for the language teaching profession and I admit that more negative features have emerged than positive ones. Perhaps one of the main sources of frustration for pupils is that they find themselves, for so much of language lesson-time, precisely - on the receiving end. Language teachers tend to the 'Transmission' end of the teaching styles spectrum (Barnes, 1971). Opportunities for pupils to discover, to interpret information, to develop a personal learning strategy are, currently, few and far between. Many subjects on the curriculum are offering pupils a chance to plan, implement and assess their own self-devised programmes of activities; they allow greater pupil freedom and autonomy. Teachers are no longer the centre-piece, indispensable at every stage. They are seen more as facilitators, enablers, points of reference, sources of advice. But, in the words of one teacher-trainer colleague:

'The linguist cannot do this to anything like the same extent: he is the only French, German or Russian 'resource', in the early years the only source of correction and information for the learner. The effect of all this is to make the relationship of the language learner to his teacher quite different from that in other subjects: to a real extent it is more authoritarian.' (Partington, 1978)

It is clear that many pupils do not object to having to adopt passive roles in language lessons, to having to submit to a master plan over which they can bring no influence to bear. Girls may find it easier to accept this submissive role having been conditioned for so long to be content or, at least, put up with a secondary role in the home, in the school and in society. But times are changing and many more pupils of both sexes will come to see the foreign language lessons as undemanding, unprofitable, uninteresting, restricting. It is already, for many pupils, a time of the school day which somehow manages to

lose its initial charm rather rapidly. By the end of the third year, it has become, for two-thirds of the school population, something to be avoided at the first available opportunity.

Of all the reasons suggested for the declining popularity of languages, the final one presented above could, ultimately, be the one for which solutions are most readily available. It does not, after all, depend on new technical aids, expensive course books, and optimum teaching conditions. It depends on the willingness of teachers to change their style, to accept a less dominant classroom presence and to adopt an approach which provides more opportunities for independent and cooperative learning on the part of pupils.

To many of the problems described in this chapter, there are no easy solutions. Given the complexity of the issues raised some might be tempted to argue for something more than mere tinkering with methodological or organisational considerations. Language teachers know of the existence of a line of argument in which the goal would be to de-school foreign languages completely. A recent, influential text promotes the idea forcefully (Hargreaves, 1982). I do not share that philosophy which would wish to deprive children of the value, rewards and joy that can be the product of learning a foreign language. Clearly, however, more research is needed if we are fully to understand and come to terms with the phenomenon of language drop-out. By focussing attention on the potential 'drop-outs' themselves, boys and girls during their pre-option year, it is hoped that the results of my own research may contribute to the continuing debate and provide some concrete suggestions for remedies.

CHAPTER THREE

THE FEMALE-MALE IMBALANCE IN LANGUAGES

NOTE

This chapter is taken from Boys, Girls and languages in School, London: CILT, 1986. It also contains sections from the article 'Where have all the young men gone?' which was published in the Times Educational Supplement on 4th February 1984. It contains detailed evidence of the numerical imbalance as revealed through careful analysis of the available statistics and data resulting from my own enquiries.

PUBLIC OPINIONS

It is a feature of most national educational systems that the older the students become, the fewer the subjects studied and the greater the specialisation within the selected subjects. In the case of Britain, the moments of choice when specialisation occurs are obviously at the ages of 14+ (options), 16+ (examinations at the end of compulsory schooling) and 18+ (examinations designed primarily to assess suitability for entry into higher education).

In many other systems, the curriculum narrows less early in a child's life and the opportunity to choose not to study a foreign language is presented only quite late, if at all. Most other European countries have decided in favour of some degree of compulsory language education in the mother tongue and foreign language throughout schooling until students begin to seek employment or entry into further or higher education sectors. Over twenty years ago, some of us can remember reading the veiled warnings of the influential Newsom report:

'Europe as a whole is ahead of this country in including a foreign language, and often two, in the general education of a much larger proportion of its citizens. Humanly and economically speaking, insularity is behind the times.' (Newsom, 1963, pl63)

In France, for example, the Baccalauréat du Deuxième Degré, since 1983 has demanded in all of its series an oral test in a foreign language. In Britain, on the other hand, the opportunities for early specialisation abound and with them comes the chance to abandon the study of a foreign language. Regrettably, those who have cast aside languages too soon have very little chance of returning to them later on, within the formal system at least, because of the way sixth form and higher education courses are currently organised.

Consequently there are numerous 'failed' linguists around the country. Evidence of successful foreign language learning is singularly lacking in society as a whole. In the field of international trade, the warnings and advice of the British Overseas Trade Board in 1979 seem to have passed largely unnoticed:

'In many overseas markets British companies cannot expect to compete effectively without a knowledge of the local language.... Very few firms are making adequate use of the language training facilities already available.... Industry and commerce should adopt a more positive attitude towards foreign language skills....'
(BOTB, 1979, p. 1)

On a purely social level, we were reminded a few years ago by our European Commissioner Christopher Tugendhat that it is gauche and ill-mannered to expect everyone else to speak our language without ever reciprocating. Surely the need for salespeople and industrialists competent in a number of languages and for linguists equipped with ancillary technical, commercial, managerial or marketing skills is not likely to diminish. The business world, however, still tends to neglect potential developed at school or college level, preferring to rely almost exclusively on private organisations to provide language tuition for their personnel.

When the Egyptians built a pyramid, they started, naturally enough at the bottom! An educational pyramid, however, is best constructed by starting at the top, especially if the pyramidal design is intended to symbolise levels of involvement and success in foreign language learning. The base and the lower strata will represent the years of compulsory schooling and the apex will be designated as the general public's knowledge of and regard for foreign languages. So let's get to the point....

ADULT EDUCATION

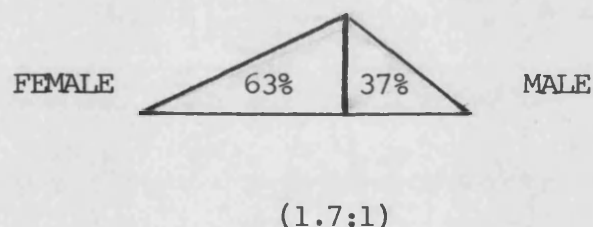
Many adults acquire a thirst for foreign language learning at some time in their life after school. What to many had seemed an unnecessary imposition of foreign culture now takes on meaning and relevance as the opportunities for travelling abroad increase. Adult classes in further education colleges and adult education centres up and down the country attract every year thousands of mature students anxious to acquire basic skills or greater proficiency in foreign languages ranging, alphabetically at least, from Arabic to Yiddish. The greater proportion of these students claim to be beginners in the language for which they enrol. Closer examination of their 'credentials' might suggest, though, that there are many for whom the French and German lessons at school were less than totally rewarding. Or they may confess to having embarked on a course but then having excluded languages entirely from their curriculum in favour of other subjects.

We begin our examination of the extent of the imbalance here, with mature students. It is not easy to gain an accurate picture of the numbers of adult foreign language learners. Nevertheless, if the sales of BBC language courses are anything to go by, a substantial minority tune in regularly to the radio and television series produced by the Continuing Education Department. Most of these listeners and viewers would be learning in the privacy of their own homes, but quite a number prefer to attach themselves to a college or

centre running formal language classes or intensive courses.

A survey conducted by the Language Centre at Brighton Polytechnic (Handley, 1984) provided some indication of the population involved. The information was gathered in 1983-1984 from 380 centres offering 4719 classes in modern languages to 64,529 adult learners. With over 60% of the centres in England and Wales responding to the enquiry, the pattern of provision which emerged can be said to be reasonably representative. The bulk of the students (78%) were between the ages of 21 and 59, but in some areas the number of retired people was considerable. The overall sex ratio was 63% female to 37% male. The peak of the pyramid is thus in place:

FIGURE 1: SEX RATIO OF ADULT LEARNERS OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES:
1983-84



No breakdown by sex for each different language was provided in the report of this study, but the ratio derived above is, I suspect, an accurate reflection of the composition of classes in most of the languages on offer.

THE TEACHING PROFESSION

Recognising the powerful image that teachers can project of their specialist subject through their own personal involvement in that teaching role, it is argued by those anxious to encourage more girls to continue with science subjects that girls need to see more women successfully following careers in science. Especially as far as schools are concerned, the more women physics and chemistry teachers there are, the better. To what extent this same argument would apply to boys and modern languages is open to question. The large number of women in language departments is, after all, part of a wider sex-stereotyping of roles which is bound to influence a child's view of the world. The fact that so many heads of department are men is another dimension of that reality.

Table 10 confirms that in language teaching women are in the majority. A comparison between the figures for 1978 and 1983 also suggests that, if anything, the gap is widening between the sexes.

TABLE 10: FULL-TIME TEACHERS IN MAINTAINED SCHOOLS:

ALL WITH DEGREES WHICH INCLUDE NAMED SUBJECT:

FRENCH

AT MARCH 31ST 1983

(figures for 1978 in brackets)

Information relating to modern languages other than French is grouped together for all languages, (Table 11) making the compilation of

separate tables for German, Spanish, etc., impossible. In this grouping of languages, however, the distribution of the sexes is much more even. There are, indeed, probably more male than female teachers of German, although, as will become apparent in a moment, the picture at undergraduate level is not so different from that of French.

TABLE 11: FULL-TIME TEACHERS IN MAINTAINED SCHOOLS:

ALL WITH DEGREES WHICH INCLUDE NAMED SUBJECT:

MODERN LANGUAGES OTHER THAN FRENCH

AT MARCH 31ST 1983

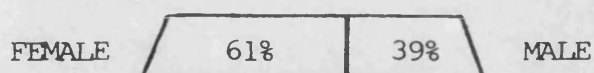
(figures for 1978 in brackets)

It should be noted that in 1978 male teachers of languages other than French outnumbered female teachers while only five years later the situation is reversed.

So the second layer of the pyramid, working downwards, is now complete with the following approximations:

FIGURE 2: SEX RATIO OF TEACHERS OF FRENCH:

1983

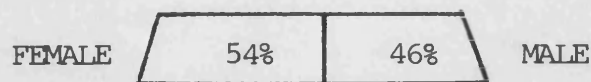


(1.57:1)

FIGURE 3: SEX RATIO OF TEACHERS OF MODERN LANGUAGES

OTHER THAN FRENCH:

1983



(1.17:1)

NEW ENTRANTS TO THE TEACHING PROFESSION

Just over 8,000 people were accepted to follow Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) courses during the academic year 1984-85. Of these, 4,545 pursued the initial training course in university departments of education (UDEs) and 3,578 went to public sector institutions, polytechnics or colleges of higher education. Recruitment for BEd courses in modern languages ceased in 1983. In 1984, of those few remaining in the system, men were greatly outnumbered by women: in fact by 10.5:1. Table 12 illustrates precisely.

TABLE 12: STUDENTS COMPLETING B.ED COURSES:

MODERN LANGUAGES:

1984

The normal initial training language teachers receive is on PGCE

courses. The year 1984 saw 889 students accepted with languages as principal method subjects. Details are provided in Tables 13, 14 & 15. The figures refer to all languages other than English. Any further categorisation by individual language is rendered impossible because, in many institutions, all language students follow a common programme of work.

TABLE 13: UNIVERSITY DEPARTMENTS OF EDUCATION:

PGCE FOREIGN LANGUAGES:

1982,1983,1984.

TABLE 14: PUBLIC SECTOR INSTITUTIONS:

PGCE FOREIGN LANGUAGES:

1982,1983,1984.

TABLE 15: ALL TEACHER TRAINING INSTITUTIONS:

PGCE FOREIGN LANGUAGES:

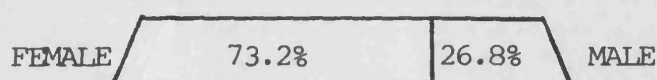
1982,1983,1984.

Falling rolls in schools and economic stringency are having a real effect in reducing the teaching force. Even over a three-year span the trend is quite noticeable with two hundred fewer trained language teachers considering joining the profession. I say 'considering' for some will inevitably choose alternative careers at the end of their training year. Others may delay entry in order to spend more time abroad or gain valuable alternative work experience. A small minority will not progress smoothly to the end of the year when the

award of qualified teacher status is conferred. The reduction in numbers is, actually, slightly more pronounced among women students than men.

The pattern of entry perpetuates, if not increases, the sex imbalance which many teachers assume exists among qualified teaching staff. On the pyramid, this layer will appear as follows:

FIGURE 4: SEX RATIO OF LANGUAGE TEACHERS IN TRAINING
(1982-84)



(2.7:1)

RESEARCH AND HIGHER DEGREES

There is one demonstrable exception to the pattern being established by this analysis of available statistics. In the field of higher degree work women are in the minority when all combinations of language (including English), literature and 'area studies' are taken into account.

TABLE 16: FULL-TIME STUDENTS AT POSTGRADUATE LEVEL
IN ALL LANGUAGES (INCLUDING ENGLISH):
RESEARCH AND TAUGHT COURSES
AT DECEMBER 31ST 1983

In the most commonly taught foreign languages at school, the figures are more evenly balanced but, given the situation at first degree level where, as we shall shortly discover the scales are tipped the other way, a disproportionate number of men currently seem to benefit from research studentships or bursaries.

TABLE 17: FULL-TIME STUDENTS AT POSTGRADUATE LEVEL
IN THREE MODERN LANGUAGES:
RESEARCH AND TAUGHT COURSES
AT DECEMBER 31ST 1983

There is no way of knowing whether men are being singled out by the funding agencies or whether women's aspirations tend not to include higher degree work. Only a detailed study of applications and the outcomes would provide the necessary evidence. Yet one might have assumed that there would be a similar ratio here as discovered at the other points of our analysis. The male preference for German is again worthy of attention but, generally speaking, the figures provide some equilibrium in what is becoming a rather lop-sided model: equilibrium, it must be acknowledged, at the expense of women.

FIGURE 5: SEX RATIO OF RESEARCH AND HIGHER DEGREE STUDENTS

IN MODERN LANGUAGES:

1983



FIRST DEGREE COURSES

The next stage to be considered must obviously be the undergraduate level. The Universities' Statistical Record provides very detailed information on undergraduate course entry and completion. The most recent complete picture available, however, relates to 1982. The usual length of degree course for foreign languages is four years, including an intercalary year spent in the target language(s) country or countries but there are three and even five year courses on offer as well. Table 18 gives the details for the academic year 1982-83. A comparison can be made with the situation four years earlier by studying the figures in brackets. It is worth recording one or two aspects arising out of this comparison.

a) There is an overall increase in the number of undergraduates enrolled for foreign language courses, 1060 to be precise. This is in line with the birth-rate curve and the general expansion in the number of higher education student places. But 1982-83 marked the

high-point of the graph in both respects: subsequent years will show a decline.

b) Whereas, with the exception of Russian, the number of women specialising in languages has increased over the four-year span, the number of men has dwindled in all languages listed. The gap is widening annually.

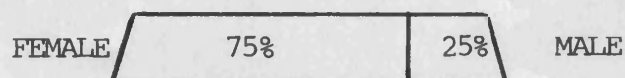
TABLE 18: FULL-TIME AND SANDWICH UNDERGRADUATES IN BRITISH
UNIVERSITIES ON 3, 4 & 5 YEAR COURSES
TO FIRST DEGREE OR DIPLOMA IN LANGUAGES:
1982-83 (1978 figures in brackets)

It is considered a valuable exercise to compile another set of data relating specifically to the main foreign languages taught in British schools. The totals for degree courses in French, German, Spanish and Russian have been calculated and are set out in Table 19.

TABLE 19: FULL-TIME AND SANDWICH UNDERGRADUATES IN BRITISH
UNIVERSITIES ON 3, 4 & 5 YEAR COURSES
TO FIRST DEGREE OR DIPLOMA
IN THE MAIN LANGUAGES TAUGHT IN BRITISH SCHOOLS:
1982-83 (1978 figures in brackets)

This combination provides us with an additional building block for the pyramid in which the female bias is again very much in evidence. The gap has widened here, too, over four years with 144 fewer men on course for a modern language degree but 740 more women.

FIGURE 6: SEX RATIO OF UNDERGRADUATE FOREIGN LANGUAGE STUDENTS



(3:1)

EXAMINATIONS AT 18+

The number of young people studying a foreign language in the sixth-form represents a very small proportion of the examination population at that level. Most telling is the graphic representation of the proportion of school leavers attempting examinations in modern languages which allows a comparison to be drawn between the number of entries at the beginning of the seventies and the beginning of the eighties. Tables 20 and 21 provide the details.

TABLE 20: ADVANCED LEVEL ENTRIES IN ENGLAND & WALES:

FRENCH

1970-71 & 1980-81

TABLE 21: ADVANCED LEVEL ENTRIES IN ENGLAND & WALES:

OTHER MODERN LANGUAGES

1970-71 & 1980-81

These bar-graphs are composed from the candidature across all schools, including single-sex and private establishments. In some contexts, however, the sex imbalance is more pronounced and the paucity of the examination entrants rather more stark.

During one local survey I carried out in 1983 involving 42 schools, (see Chapter 7 for details), I 'unearthed' only 321 Advanced level students of French in both years of the sixth-form. Of these, 287 were girls and 34 were boys: a ratio of 8.4:1. This imbalance is more pronounced than the national average and, not surprisingly, was a source of some concern to the teachers in the schools. In the official statistics, the decline in numbers for French over the decade has been three times as prominent among the male population as among females. In the case of other languages, girls' entries have remained static, despite a growing school population, whereas there has been a 0.4% reduction in boy entrants.

Statistics of examination entries are notoriously difficult to compile for the amateur researcher. Fortunately, in recent Inspection Reports, (HMI, 1985a; 1985b) and consultative documents (DES, 1983), there have been published useful statistical appendices. I reprint some of the details provided in these because the next layer of the pyramid depends on them. Table 22 shows total entries and the number of passes for each sex over a four-year period. Two things should constantly be borne in mind while studying these figures: numbers may appear relatively steady from year to year, but the total number of

students staying on after the age of 16 has risen; the ratio of success, girls to boys, has increased noticeably even in this span of time. For example, in 1979 for French the ratio was 1.78:1, for German 1.99:1, and in Spanish 2.3:1. In 1983 the same calculation produced French 2.71:1, German 2.39:1 and Spanish 2.65:1.

TABLE 22: GCE ADVANCED LEVEL RESULTS BY SUBJECT:

FRENCH, GERMAN, SPANISH, ITALIAN, RUSSIAN,

OTHER MODERN LANGUAGES:

1979-83

It must be noted that Table 22 includes candidates from further education colleges and overseas candidates. This set of figures also permits us to monitor the trends over the period illustrated. What is especially disconcerting is the decline in the number of boys studying French. It is worth recording, for the sake of another comparative exercise, that in 1968, 7,169 boys passed Advanced level French, 1,623 more than fourteen years later! The figures for 1983 record a slight improvement over those for the years immediately preceeding (a hiccup in the birth-rate?), but the trend is still downwards and the gap between the sexes widens with each year.

A glance at another set of statistics for the school year 1981-82 referring uniquely to state maintained schools (Table 23) will reveal a greater margin between the sexes at this level.

TABLE 23: GCE ADVANCED LEVEL ENTRIES IN MAINTAINED SCHOOLS:

FRENCH, GERMAN, ITALIAN, RUSSIAN, SPANISH

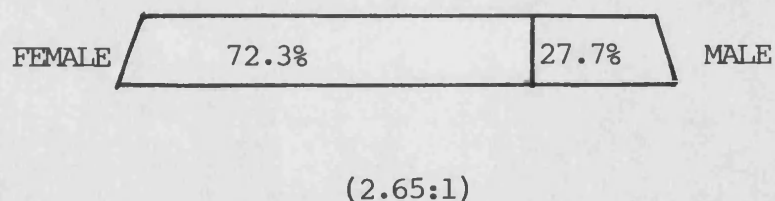
& TOTAL MODERN LANGUAGES:

SCHOOL LEAVERS 1981-82

In the majority of schools outside the state sector it is deemed essential for pupils to retain a foreign language within their curriculum until the age of 16+. Naturally, under these circumstances it is far more likely that sixth-form foreign language classes will be reasonably well-subscribed. It is unfortunate, to say the least, that pupils in the state-maintained sector are encouraged to make up their minds about their strengths and weaknesses much earlier. Their counterparts in the private sector will have had, by the age of entry into the sixth-form, two extra years to assess both their own aptitude for foreign languages and the wisdom of maintaining contact with the subject.

On average, therefore, there are nearly four girls to every one boy pursuing an Advanced level language course. Pass rates differ from language to language, from sector to sector, and obviously from school to school, but based on 1983, the sex ratio of success for the commonly taught languages would be as illustrated in Figure 7.

FIGURE 7: SEX RATIO OF EXAMINATION PASSES AT 18+



EXAMINATIONS AT 16+

Whereas the proportion of modern languages students at A level had declined between 1971 and 1981, the population taking language exams at the end of compulsory schooling had risen.

TABLE 24: PERCENTAGE OF SCHOOL LEAVERS ATTEMPTING
CSE OR O LEVEL IN
FRENCH AND OTHER MODERN LANGUAGES:
1970-71 & 1980-81

The bar graphs which form Table 24 give an impression of progress and growth, albeit minimal in the case of boys. However, to put the increases into perspective, we need to compare the rate of increase in languages with that in other subjects as the examination population has itself risen over the decade.

TABLE 25: PERCENTAGE OF ENGLISH SCHOOL LEAVERS
WHO ATTEMPTED CSE OR O LEVEL
IN MODERN LANGUAGES, SCIENCE, MATHS & ENGLISH:

1970-71 TO 1980-81

Table 25 illustrates starkly that the rise of approximately 9% for languages falls a long way short of the corresponding rises of 29% in science, 31% in maths and 29% in English. In these areas of the curriculum, the accessibility and increasing use of CSE as a public examination has led to a reasonable number of children gaining certificates at the end of their schooling. Not so for languages. In real terms, rates of entry have not kept pace with the other subjects even though many more pupils have been given access to foreign language learning following the reorganisation of schools along comprehensive lines.

There are differences in entry figures for the various languages and in the two examinations at this level. It is unnecessary to supply all the details here. I am more concerned by general trends than the minutiae of particular languages at the moment. Nonetheless, given that French is by far the dominant language, it is advisable, at least to chart the growth and decline in this language, as they affect the sexes over a reasonable span of time. The marginal increases recorded in Table 24 refer to a combination of CSE and O level entries. There is concealed within these broadly-based statistics an alarming trend relating specifically to boys and French at Ordinary level. While entries for CSE have risen consistently for both sexes, it appears that boys have abandoned the more demanding of the tests entirely, or that they have been switched to CSE by teachers who have preferred not to risk the complete absence of

certification for their pupils at the end of the course.

TABLE 26: O LEVEL ENTRIES IN SUMMER EXAMINATIONS:

FRENCH

1966-1983

TABLE 27: CSE ENTRIES:

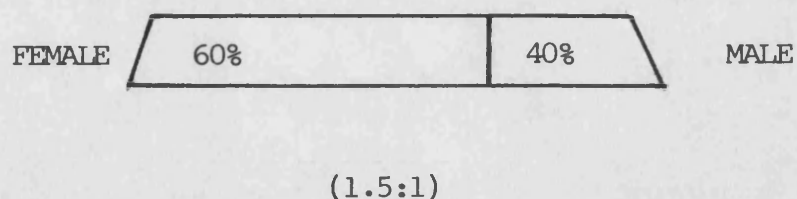
FRENCH

1967-1983

Has it become more difficult to gain an O level pass in a modern foreign language or were the standards set years ago, before comprehensive schools came into being, based on too high expectations of pupil performance in English and the foreign language? Whatever the reason, while CSE has continued to attract candidates, many in Mode 3 of the system, the gap between the sexes is widening all the time. At O level the decline in numbers of boys is most in evidence, and since the beginning of the eighties, both sexes seem to be turning away increasingly from French.

To construct an accurately measured building block for the pyramid out of all these statistics is not easy. It would be fair, even generous, to conclude that girls outnumber boys in examinations at the age of 16+ by 3:2. In some sectors of schooling and in some languages it is probably nearer 3:1. Figure 8 gives an over-simplified picture undoubtedly.

FIGURE 8: SEX RATIO OF EXAMINATION ENTRIES AT 16+



CHOICES AT THE OPTION STAGE

The presence of a foreign language in the core curriculum for all pupils 11-16 would inevitably reduce the discrepancy between female and male candidature in examinations at age 16+. But such a change in curricular provision in the words of HMI 'can be envisaged only as a long-term goal' (HMI, 1985a, p21). In some schools this is indeed the pattern and it has become a fact of life for pupils and teachers alike. But the opinions of the language teaching profession, as measured by debates at annual Joint Council of Language Associations' conferences and in discussions during in-service courses, are divided on the issue. Many teachers still regard such a change as an undesirable development. At the time of writing, it is known that HMI is conducting its own survey of schools where a language is included in the core curriculum. The report of this 'research' should point to the advantages and disadvantages of this form of curriculum.

With over 90% of pupils now being given the chance to study a foreign language in the early years of schooling, a national average of

33%-35% uptake at the option stage must be viewed as disappointing. Even when pupils have made a positive choice in favour of continuing with a language it appears that satisfaction is not guaranteed. A Schools Council exploratory study of option choices in ten schools in 1982 produced a gloomy picture for the teachers in the schools under scrutiny, and elsewhere. When asked about their sense of satisfaction with the selection of subjects they had made, pupils argued that the subject that they were least happy with was French. French was ranked 15th out of fifteen subjects mentioned. Table 28 refers.

TABLE 28: SATISFACTION WITH SPECIFIC OPTIONS:

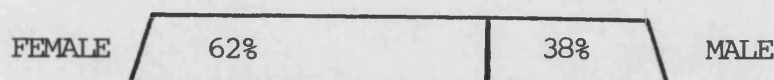
OVERALL RANKING BY 4TH & 5TH FORMERS IN 10 SCHOOLS
1982

In the HMI survey reported in the publication Boys and Modern Languages (HMI, 1985a), thirty-two schools were involved. The original aim had been to identify schools where the number of boys choosing to take one or more modern languages exceeded 50% of the total take-up. In fifteen of the main sample of schools selected by Inspectors the take-up rate did, in fact, go above 50%. However, it must be understood that in six of these a language was a core curriculum subject and in another seven the options scheme operating actively encouraged, in its design, the continuation of a language by the majority, i.e. it was made very difficult for pupils to avoid languages. In reality, only two of the schools operated the more usual free choice option system. In no school did the boys outnumber the girls. In all the survey took in only eight schools

with open or free choice as far as languages were concerned. Some of these schools qualified for inclusion because the combined percentage uptake for the sexes was boosted well above 50% by the girls alone. In one school the gap between the sexes was significantly below that of perceived national norms: 77.1% of all pupils continued with a language but this was composed of 16.0% boys and 61.1% girls. Sex-stereotyping in the curriculum of that school would be a worthy field of study, but HMI did not really address itself to this aspect in its writing-up of results.

It is certainly becoming more difficult to maintain pupils' initial enthusiasm for foreign-language learning and to attract pupils of both sexes on to examination courses in years four and five. Taking into account a range of statistical evidence from a number of different sources we discover that, as we near the base of the pyramid, the ratio of girls to boys for courses of study in the fourth and fifth year is, by and large, set after only two or three years of exposure to a language.

FIGURE 9: SEX RATIO AT 14+: THE OPTION STAGE



(1.63:1)

THE FIRST THREE YEARS OF FOREIGN-LANGUAGE LEARNING

We have now reached what may be termed the foundation of our educational pyramid. There is, indeed, one further feature of the sex imbalance that occurs even earlier than the option stage.

Research has shown that pupils generally opt for subjects in which they feel they have a reasonable chance of success (Bartley, 1970; Duckworth & Entwistle, 1974; Ormerod, 1975; Obanya, 1976; Buckby, 1981; Bardell, 1982; Coulton, 1984;). In many ways the research produces commonsense expectations and confirms the beliefs of practising teachers in this respect.

Pupils are quick to evaluate their own position in the school hierarchy where academic success is the prize. British teachers of foreign languages have, generally speaking, rejected the notion of mixed ability teaching for other than the first stages of the learning process. They prefer to set pupils according to proven or assumed linguistic ability. I use the word 'assumed' because in some schools setting can take place as early as half-term in the first term of the first year. It has been my view for a long time that many able boys fail to take languages seriously or appear to be performing less well than girls because they find themselves relegated too early to ability sets lower than is appropriate. Consequently, those pupils in the school who gain the reputation for being linguistically 'gifted' tend to be girls. There is little chance of redressing the balance between boys and girls in the upper school if the imbalance

has already been created and fixed during, or at the end of, the first year.

In an attempt to determine the extent to which pupils were split up according to sex at the same time as they were setted by ability, I conducted, in 1983, a survey of 42 mixed comprehensive schools in one local authority. (A copy of the questionnaire used for this survey can be found in Appendix B.) To speak of segregation would be to create the idea that there was a conscious decision on the part of the staff, usually heads of departments, who drew up the rolls for the setted teaching groups, to separate the sexes. On the contrary, I have met teachers, both male and female who make a deliberate effort to retain parity of numbers between the sexes in the classes in their departments.

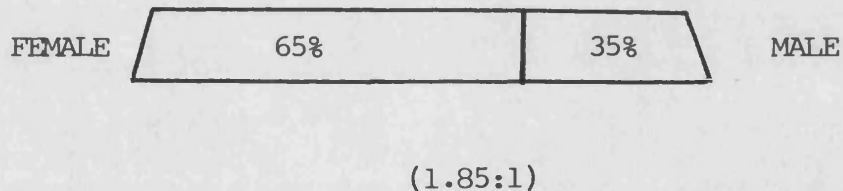
Generally, however, reorganising pupils after mixed ability classes or broad bands does result in many more boys than girls finding themselves in lower groups and, conversely, very few - sometimes only a handful of boys in the top set. It will be obvious by now that I seriously question the wisdom of setting pupils so precipitously, so soon after their initial encounter with a foreign language, if so striking an imbalance in the allocation of places as shown in Table 29 is the result. An extreme, but by no means isolated, case was that where one school had a policy of reorganising classes into sets at Christmas-time in the first year and, come January, only two boys were deemed worthy of top set places.

TABLE 29: DISTRIBUTION OF THE SEXES IN TOP SETS FOR FRENCH
IN 42 MIXED COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOLS

Some of the schools, aware of the risks of sex-stereotyping and anxious to keep all pupils' expectations high, had decided to implement schemes whereby two parallel top sets had been created. These numbers are included in the table.

The final phase of pyramid building has, therefore, been reached with a similar pattern being established at the base as in the layers above.

FIGURE 10: SEX RATIO AT 12+ FOLLOWING SETTING BY ABILITY



ENDPIECE

In the preceeding pages I have shown how, at various key stages in our education system, the numbers of those studying foreign languages decline. The majority of those who remain on course in school, who take up specialist interests after school, who make a career out of their skills or who return to study languages later in life, are

women. This is not unexpected perhaps when we realise how organisation and provision in many schools actually reduce the chances for equality of opportunity at an early age. The completed pyramid (Table 30) gives an overview of the progressive steps of the analysis. The scale of the layers may not reflect accurately the numbers involved, but the division of the sexes in terms of access to and perseverance in formal language learning is clear enough.

TABLE 30: THE FEMALE-MALE IMBALANCE IN FOREIGN LANGUAGES:

THE COMPLETE PYRAMID

By cataloguing the numerical imbalance between the sexes and, indeed, by publishing these results in the Information Guide for CILT (Powell, 1986), I hoped to alert the teaching profession to the risks of perpetuating forms of organisation and expectations that can serve only to reinforce the view that languages are more pertinent to girls' education than boys'. Personally, I place a high value on foreign language education for all, for the duration of compulsory schooling. I have grave doubts about a system that permits, even encourages, such early specialisation.

Perhaps language teachers should now be looking forward more positively to a time when no school subject will risk being labelled 'masculine' or 'feminine'; when it will be perfectly normal for both boys and girls to learn a language for at least five years. This, after all, is the situation in so many other countries where, mindful of vocational, cultural, economic and recreational goals, teachers

and parents are insisting that the children in their charge, irrespective of sex, develop foreign language skills beyond minimum competence levels.

In this chapter I have laid stress on the structure of education. Questions still remain. What factors besides organisational constraints determine an individual's performance in foreign-language learning? What factors influence an individual's motivation and attitude, so crucial to success in academic achievement in this field? In the next chapter the focus will be on some of the research that has considered biological, cognitive and affective variables in language learning and achievement. We will, of course, be interested specifically in the ways the sexes may diverge in these facets of learning.

CHAPTER FOUR

SEX AND GENDER DIFFERENCES IN EDUCATION

CLARIFICATIONS

(This chapter is an abridged version of parts of Chapter 1 & Chapter 3 of Boys, Girls and Languages in School, London: CILT, (1986))

'We must assume that a substantial part of any human characteristic, be it "masculinity" or "intelligence" is cultural and hence open to change.' (Delamont, 1980, p.1)

The above statement could have been offered as a neat conclusion to this brief review of some of the literature on sex and gender differences in education. I have decided to include it, instead, as an optimistic preface - optimistic because, if we accept the all-pervasive influence of social attitudes on children's concepts of gender and gender roles and we believe that traditional divisions between the sexes in areas of responsibility and action are now inappropriate, then we can set about changing attitudes and practices within schools. This is, indeed, what some local authorities through their initiation of equal opportunities projects have been seeking to do. Clwyd is an example of one LEA outside London and the other large metropolitan districts that has broken new ground in joint undertakings with the Equal Opportunities Commission. Currently, teachers in many schools are actively engaged in reviewing their curriculum policies and classroom procedures. Pupils themselves are challenging outdated assumptions about boys' and girls' apparently

differing needs.

All of this has not occurred by accident. It is largely the result of vigorous campaigning, especially by the Women's movement. Our awareness of the damaging effects of sex-stereotyping in education has increased rapidly over the past few years. Attention has, rightly, mostly been directed to a consideration of the question of girls' education, the most easily identifiable goal being, in curricular terms, to increase the number of girls taking sciences. It is only relatively recently that there has been serious attention paid to the lost opportunities for boys in the Arts.

No language teacher can afford to remain indifferent or complacent in the present debate. No school policy on equal opportunities should neglect the perspective of the foreign languages department. As a direct consequence of the drift away from French by boys, the whole of foreign language education increasingly runs the risk of being labelled - and, disturbingly, dismissed as 'feminine'. Yet, if we recognise that society's values are changing and that change can be hastened by concerted action among teachers and educationists then, I believe, there are grounds for optimism.

Delamont provided me with a useful quotation to set this chapter in motion. She also provides the reader with a necessary, clear definition of the distinction between the terms 'sex' and 'gender'.

'Sex should properly refer to the biological aspects of male and female existence. "Sex differences" should therefore only be used to refer to physiology, anatomy, genetics, hormones and so forth. Gender should properly be used to refer to all the non-biological aspects of

differences between male and female - clothes, interests, attitudes, behaviours and aptitudes, for example, which separate "masculine" from "feminine" life styles'. (Delamont, 1980, p5)

Not every writer on this subject during the last twenty years or so has adhered rigidly to this definition. The volumes and articles upon which I choose to comment include sometimes confused, sometimes confusing terminology.

Whereas in the sixties and seventies it was customary to see researchers tackling the vexed question of sex differences in physiological and cognitive development from a quasi-clinical point of view, the tendency latterly has been to abandon pseudo-scientific empiricism in favour of observation, description and analysis of learning and learned behaviours in which there appear to be noticeable gender differences. In this chapter, primary and secondary data spanning both research modes will be the object of critical review.

A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The vast majority of British children now experience secondary education in mixed comprehensive schools. This fact of life today is quite remarkable if we pause to consider the strength of opposition to co-education which characterised so much of the educational literature in the twenties, thirties and forties. Those who question the wisdom of educating girls and boys together received renewed encouragement a couple of years ago with the publication of the

strongly argued Co-education reconsidered (Deem, 1984).

The comprehensive school as an institution has been - and continues to be - something of a political football. Yet it was only with the advent of comprehensive schools in large numbers during the sixties and seventies and the increase in the number of mixed schools subsequent to reorganisation that society began to question, albeit in a limited way, the differing values placed upon boys' and girls' educational needs and provision.

Successive official education reports and documents which paved the way for the 1944 Education Act did nothing to suggest that, forty years on, the single-sex state school would be the exception rather than the rule. Single-sex education seemed the only possibility for the nation's children who would have, it was assumed, vastly different career destinations and work experience. It seemed only natural that boys should emerge from schools equipped to manage the economy, govern the nation, design the tools of industry, etc. Girls, on the other hand, were destined for less challenging roles. For example, in the Hadow report of 1926, it was argued that they should be well versed in the intricacies of housewifery if Britain were to prosper! Seventeen years later, the Norwood report was published containing a similar philosophy. This was manifestly a document about the education of male pupils since the female of the species hardly deserved a mention as a group. This committee justified the inclusion of domestic subjects in the curriculum because, first and foremost, 'knowledge of such subjects is a necessary equipment for all girls as potential makers of homes' (Norwood, 1943).

The tripartite system proposed in the 1944 legislation was founded, with a few exceptions, on the retention of single-sex schools; with several obvious differences in curricular aims and provision being sustained. In 1963, the influential report of the Central Advisory Council for Education, better known as the Newsom Report, was published. This dealt specifically with pupils of average or below average ability. In the first part of the document, in a section dealing with objectives we can read:

'This is a century which has seen and is still seeing marked changes in the status and economic role of women. Girls themselves need to be made aware of the new opportunities which may be open to them and both boys and girls will be faced with evolving a new concept of partnership in their personal relations, at work and in marriage.'
(Newsom, 1963, p28)

But this paragraph is rather a token acknowledgement of changing circumstances. The report elsewhere constantly links engineering, crafts and technical work with boys' aspirations (and hence curriculum needs) while jobs in offices, in shops and in catering are the girls' destiny - not to mention what is dubbed 'their most important vocational concern,' marriage.

We have to wait until 1975 for a real challenge to the social and educational order. Education Survey No. 21 (HMI, 1975), referred to at some length in Chapter 2, provided hard evidence of the sex polarisation of curricular options especially, in numerical terms, with regard to male dominance in the sciences and that of females in language studies.

If it is believed that a broad, balanced curriculum including sciences and languages is desirable for all pupils, then stronger advice is needed to LEAs and schools. Eleven years after the publication of that report the situation for languages is even more acute since the attraction of the sciences for both sexes has certainly increased.

ASPECTS OF THE RESEARCH

The developments in educational thinking mapped out above have run parallel to (some would say strongly influenced by) research in the social sciences and psychology into perceived or supposed sex differences. Much of the early work in this field was carried out in the United States.

Recognised as something of an epic, The development of sex differences, edited by Eleanor Maccoby, was published in Britain in 1967. Here the paramount question of the relative influence of biological attributes and socialisation through culture was studied in depth through a survey of the available research. The editor's own chapter on 'Sex differences in intellectual functioning' concludes with the following cautious note:

'We find then that environmental effects are not merely something added to, or superimposed upon, whatever innate temperamental differences there are that affect intellectual functioning. Rather, there is a complex interaction. The two sexes would appear to have somewhat different intellectual strengths and weaknesses, and hence different influences serve to counteract the weaknesses and augment

the strengths.' (Maccoby, 1967, p51)

Later, collaborating with Carol Jacklin, Maccoby compiled the weighty volume The psychology of sex differences (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974). This was intended as a sequel to the earlier work and gathered together a massive array of evidence concerning how the sexes differ, or do not in fact differ, in many aspects of psychological behaviour. Their ambitious undertaking was to sift the relevant academic literature, by now proliferating at a remarkable rate, and draw some broad guidelines. They set themselves the task of determining which of the many conclusions drawn by researchers could be said to have a firm factual basis and which could be rejected as unproven or still equivocal. The annotated bibliography of research monographs running to 231 pages provides some fascinating insights about studies ranging from esoteric topics such as 'Sex differences in field dependence for the eskimo' (there are none), to others probably more relevant to our own topic such as the effects of peer group behaviour on the different sexes (where boys were found to be more susceptible to friends' influence and persuasion than girls).

In their section dealing with intellectual abilities and cognitive styles they assessed the validity of what they called 'one of the more solidly established generalisations', namely the conventional view that females are superior to males in verbal tasks. They took into consideration no fewer than 136 studies spanning virtually the whole life cycle in terms of the subjects in the experiments, i.e. from 3 months to 84 years. The tests focussed on aspects of language such as vocabulary naming and recognition, verbal imitation, fluency

and reading comprehension. It is a pity that, included in this review, were no studies of foreign language acquisition or formal learning. All the experiments related to activities in the mother tongue although one or two did include references to bilingual children.

There is little point in dwelling on individual inquiries within the Maccoby and Jacklin text. It needs stating, however, that the work of these two women served to reinforce in the minds of academics and practitioners the traditional theory that differences really do exist in verbal performance, that they are minimal at primary school age, but that at around the age of ten or eleven girls come into their own in linguistic competence. Conversely, it was reported that, in visual spatial tasks, boys have the advantage, their superiority tending to emerge in early adolescence - in some aptitude tests even earlier - and continuing into adulthood.

Almost as soon as their monumental work was published, Maccoby and Jacklin came in for a good deal of criticism. That was perhaps the inevitable consequence of their desire to summarise such a vast amount of evidence and draw their own conclusions at a time when the debate was intensifying with every new article published. Jeanne Block, in an erudite, persuasive and critical appraisal of their work two years after it was published considered it to be 'a controversial portrayal of the field'. (Block, 1976, p283)

There is always the risk that the ill-informed may be too easily

persuaded of the existence of hard evidence to support already well-formed preconceptions. When someone has gone to the trouble of collecting together sets of data and providing a neat structure in which everything seems to fit, in our eagerness for conclusions we regard the overall picture as more authoritative than is warranted. This is particularly likely to happen when the topic under study is, by its very nature, polemical, as investigations into sex differences usually are.

The psychology of sex differences made an important contribution to improving our understanding of the complexities of human nature, but uncritical readers ran the risk of perpetuating myths about men's and women's 'special' skills and propensities. Fortunately, however, it did more than offer a digest of published research; it included a sensitive study of the major psychological theories that purport to explain why sex differences should occur at all. These the authors reduce to three comprehensible developmental theories. It is worth quoting here the abbreviated versions they included in the introduction since they became the parameters within which so much of the subsequent research took place.

Origins of Psychological Sex Differences

1) Through imitation: children choose same sex models (particularly the same sex parent) and use these models more than the opposite sex models for patterning their own behaviour. This selective modelling need not be deliberate on the child's part.

2) Through praise or discouragement: parents (and others) reward and praise boys for what they conceive to be 'boylike' behaviour and actively discourage boys when they engage in activities that seem feminine; similarly girls receive positive reinforcement for 'feminine' behaviour, negative reinforcement for 'masculine' behaviour.

3) Through self-socialisation: the child develops a concept of what it is to be male and female, and then, once he (or she) has a clear understanding of his (or her) sex identity, he (or she) attempts to fit his (or her) own behaviour to his (or her) concept of what behaviour is sex-appropriate.

Most of the sex differences that Maccoby and Jacklin had reported and commented upon were, in fact, incidental to the investigators' real research goals. This could be interpreted as a positive feature, of course, since bias was presumably less likely to be a contributory factor in these experiments.

One other set of theories that is highly applicable to explaining sex differences in educational contexts is that relating to achievement motivation. Veroff (1977) looked at the different ways in which people define and interpret successful accomplishments. He found that while females focus upon and emphasize the process itself i.e.

assessing their achievement in personal terms such as whether they considered they had tried hard enough at a task, whether they had managed on their own or sought advice or help, males tended to stress the impact of the accomplishment, its overall effect on those around and how it rated against other people's performance.

Other concepts that researchers centred their interests upon in the seventies were 'hope of success' and 'fear of failure'. Succinct reviews of the work done can be found in Nash (1979), Viaene (1979) and Stockard (1980). For those interested particularly in girls' under-performance in science, understanding the causal attributes between anticipation of success or failure and outcomes of instruction became the priority. Several studies (Horner, 1974; Frieze, 1975; Ward, 1979) and those of Viaene herself have pointed to the fact that males more than females tend to attribute their success to their personal ability; whereas females are more inclined to interpret both success and failure as due more to temporary factors such as luck or effort.

Interestingly, the performance tasks used in Viaene's experiments among Dutch 15-18 year olds involved solving anagrams. She makes no specific reference to the linguistic nature of the test or its likely effect on results, something I find rather unusual. Yet, it would be imprudent of us to ignore research such as hers and the hypotheses it set out to test in our search for relevant findings to enlighten us further in the realm of foreign language learning.

The notion of success in language learning must, in the pupil's mind, be associated with complete mastery, total fluency, bilingualism, enjoying communication in the target language with the ease and confidence of a native speaker of that language. This is an ideal to which many beginners may naively aspire but incredibly few will achieve, even after a lifetime's learning. Hence the opportunities for sensing frustration and failure abound. Young pupils' unrealistic expectations of success are eventually - fairly soon in the case of some learners - halted, and a re-adjustment of aspirations becomes necessary. One could hypothesise about the effects of these thwarted ambitions on the sexes, taking into account the research findings mentioned above. Could it be that young male students, in attributing reasons for their lack of progress, evaluate themselves as 'not up to the task' and, having done so, limit their chances of progress even further by living out this self-defined, self-fulfilling prophesy?

It would be over-simplistic to postulate further that girls are more likely to consider the difficulties they experience in attempting to reach near-native competence as 'bad luck' on their part. There are, after all, researchers working with more sophisticated techniques who have produced results that reveal considerable ambivalence about failure in both sexes. (Weinreich-Haste, 1978) However, within the general framework of expectancies that characterise and distinguish male and female ambitions, it is possible that girls are conditioned to 'go on trying', or at least they find it easier to make that necessary realignment of their sights in the light of experience. In other words they find it easier

to accommodate their disappointments when they realise just how hard it is to learn a foreign language properly because they have grown accustomed, more than boys, to accept delayed gratification.

The frequency of teachers' comments referring to the persistence and patience of girls (see Chapter 7), renders the 'perseverance factor' a vitally important element in the search for reasons for sex differences in language learning. Experience would suggest that this phenomenon is not confined to foreign language learning; it is a common enough feature of general academic orientation where formal learning takes place. By shifting the emphasis from language learning as a structured, linear, knowledge-based activity to a skill-focussed means of achieving short-term, authentic, functional goals - all of which is consistent with communicative methodology - language teachers may have found one of the keys to providing many more boys (and girls) with reasons for self-fulfilment, self-motivation and more constructive perceptions of these particular achievement tasks.

SEXISM IN SCHOOLS

The realisation that any sex difference identified and discussed in Maccoby & Jacklin's survey had been, in most cases, merely one among several variables built into the research designs of the experiments, led to their recommending that more specific research should be carried out to test hypotheses that were explicitly related to sex differences. This exhortation, together with increasing

dissatisfaction with the broad sweep of their conclusions, served to stimulate a flurry of research activity on both sides of the Atlantic. When that research was directed more deliberately at education - especially in studies exploring the causal link between provision and outcomes - it added new impetus to the discussions that were being generated in the late seventies and early eighties about sexism in schools.

With a few notable exceptions, most major contributions to the literature on sexism have emanated and continue to come from women writers. This is hardly surprising since women have most to gain from exposing sexist practices. Some might add 'and men have most to lose', but that would be in itself a pitifully jaundiced view of changing social attitudes over the past twenty years. In the case of modern languages it is manifestly not true that boys would have most to lose. For by conforming to stereotyped expectations many boys have missed out on language learning in school only to feel inadequate later on in life in their social and commercial contacts with people in other countries.

Rather than concentrate on the biological or evolutionary foundations for theories about sex differences in cognitive and social behaviour, commentators in the early seventies began to press home the arguments about social and cultural conditioning. The emphasis on explaining sex differences in terms of innate biological features such as sex hormones or developmental characteristics such as cerebral assymetry brought with it the danger that, however unwarranted some of the

claims, certain 'proofs' might be used to defend traditional sex-roles. Given that Western societies were undergoing rapid changes in social customs and law affecting the sexes, it became essential to illustrate and explain how the 'natural order' for centuries past was ill-conceived, artificial and in its exclusion of women from positions of authority and decision-making, totally unacceptable. It was crucial for women writers - and still is - to demonstrate the extent to which our institutions had been designed and continued to function in a way likely to maintain, either by legislation or convention, traditional suppositions about the status and roles of the two sexes.

Major themes to emerge in the literature during these years were the following: play and social relationships during pre-school years, parent-child interaction, pupils' self-evaluations, teacher behaviour, teacher-pupil interaction, the effects of economic stringency on curriculum and resource provision, children's fear of opposite sex labelling, peer-group pressure. One or two of these items lend themselves to further brief comment.

Eileen Byrne (1974) had pointed to the way in which the funding of education, so often assumed to be evenly distributed across the country, affected the regions in different ways. The North, in her survey, came off far worse than the southern counties and worst hit apparently were girls' schools. Within the mixed school, too, she claimed that per capita spending tended to be greater for boys than for girls because of the nature of the curriculum that each was

following. Later, Rosemary Deem (1978) warned how reductions in spending, something that has continued to dominate educational discussions, may greatly hinder innovations designed to amend people's attitudes and lifestyles.

Differentiation on grounds of sex is so often based on unequal allocation and distribution of learning resources. Shortage of funds may not only mean the continued use of sexist teaching materials; it may also prevent boys and girls from making less traditional choices of subjects because insufficient teachers or facilities are available. Similarly, when job opportunities are restricted the temptation is for parents and teachers to adopt a 'play safe' stance regarding career advice, however misguided this may be, in reality, for the children's future.

Guttentag & Bray (1976), Lee & Stewart (1976), Chetwynd & Hartnett (1978), Hartnett et al (1979), Delamont (1980), Stockard (1980), Stockard & Johnson (1980), Sutherland (1981), Council of Europe (1982), Kelly (1982), Kessler et al (1985) are among those who have focussed their efforts on sex-role stereotyping and the school practices which are liable to perpetuate it. We begin to see in the later works cited attention being paid to the education of boys as well as girls. Inevitably, however, it is the radical wing of the Women's Movement that has kept the debate on sexism moving forwards.

Sara Delamont's advice to the reader of the popular text Sex roles and the school, (1980) namely that the theory underlying the book is

'sociological but it is a critical, feminist sociology', is perhaps an unnecessary caution. However, her chapter on the adolescent in school makes salutary reading for any secondary school teacher.

Dale Spender is another academic who has made important contributions to the discussions (1980; 1982). She catalogues the way society, through its institutions, particularly education, presents a one-sided view of the world - that is, a male perception. No-one is spared in her systematic critique of current practice, not even the author herself. In a section dealing with teacher-pupil interaction in mixed classrooms she centres upon research that demonstrates the degree to which male dominance and attention seeking is rife. Most telling here is the gap between what teachers think they are doing and what they actually do. Attempting to distribute teacher attention equitably across the sexes is seemingly incredibly difficult. Even when she subjected herself to a monitoring exercise of her own teaching, she only managed a maximum of 42% of lesson time interacting with girls. Her lessons were science lessons but research in local schools around Bath would suggest that the same male domination occurs in foreign language lessons too. (Batters, 1987)

Another researcher who has made a study of what she defines the 'sexual divisions in the classroom' is Michele Stanworth. In Gender and schooling (1983) she reported on research into classroom interaction in the further education sector. Her observation ground was the relatively neutral territory of mixed Advanced level humanities classes. Even here it was noticed that fairly subtle

aspects of classroom encounters continued to generate a sexual hierarchy of worth in which men emerged as the 'naturally dominant sex'. Stanworth also has a lot to say about pupils' awareness of the gender of their teachers and the possible effect this may have on their self-image and success in school. These are points that will be taken up in later chapters, but it is my view that writers such as Stanworth have overestimated the impression that a teacher's sex brings to the subject being studied. As for the link between sex of teacher and pupil self-esteem - I have yet to see a reliable way of isolating this supposed connection in research terms, let alone gauging the power it may have over children's minds.

On the other hand I do believe that pupils are prone to accept what Sutherland calls 'sex-role-indicated' subjects (Sutherland, 1981). The pressure on them so to do can be quite obvious within the school which may, for example, boast a 'fine tradition' of science degrees among its former pupils. Those who may have an interest in art or music, not to mention modern languages, may feel inhibited about displaying their interests overtly. They may adopt a contradictory posture to avoid being labelled in what they see as an unfavourable, sometimes hurtful way. This brings us neatly on to the question of the labels pupils and teachers consciously or subconsciously give to subjects and activities in school.

The study of the curriculum is a comparatively new pursuit of education academics. The way the school curriculum is organised and presented is the main focus of their attention. But this new academic

discipline has provided additional insights into the subtle and various means through which schools communicate values and assumptions to those working in the establishments (i.e. to both pupils and teachers). The 'covert' or 'hidden' curriculum has been described by Davies and Meighan (1975) as:

'those concepts of learning in schools that are unofficial or unintentional or undeclared consequences of the way in which teachers organise and execute teaching and learning'.

Clearly, the messages transmitted by teachers to pupils about subjects in the curriculum, about relative status, about usefulness or difficulty - to name but a few qualities - are never value-free. Examination of curricular provision and choice has featured in most texts dealing with sexism, sex bias or sex-discrimination.

Possibly because he is a practising headteacher, Michael Marland, as editor of the collection of essays released under the title Sex differentiation and schooling (Marland, 1983), guaranteed that the book would have a strong practical component. The contributors were asked 'to get behind the broad generalisations and to go back to basic detail', so there are sections dealing very specifically with staffing, classroom interaction, careers counselling. The hidden curriculum is discussed by focussing on teachers' expectations. The overt curriculum is also treated in terms of planning, subject choice, teaching and learning materials, pupil groupings and teaching methods. There is a chapter dealing with the teaching and learning of mathematics - but hardly a mention of modern languages. To be fair, the editor recognises this as a major omission in his introduction, but it is a regrettable fact that in the literature

on sexism and sex-stereotyping, foreign language education is virtually always completely ignored or deemed worthy of only the most fleeting of references.

The same criticism cannot be levelled at Sexism in the secondary school (Whyld, 1983). This is a valuable compilation of papers, each of which analyses the ways in which sexism operates in the specialist subjects and across the curriculum. There is a chapter on modern languages. Hingley (1983) quotes results from the HMI survey of 1973 (HMI, 1975) but also reports on previously unpublished research that looked into pupils' attitudes and expectations about courses in the third and fourth years of the secondary school. Boys seemed fully aware of the problems facing them - or to be avoided by opting out - while girls, expecting the subject to be 'difficult but stimulating', were more prepared to face up to the difficulties and tended to attribute any subsequent loss of interest on their part to those same difficulties. Girls also gave the subject, in this case German, a much higher importance rating than boys. The children who took part in this survey were few in number and limited to one school, so it would be unwise to make too much of the results, but they do, in essence, support earlier speculation on my part. Hingley then concentrates on sex-stereotyping within the teaching texts available at the time. He presents, with apposite illustrations, some positive strategies that teachers can employ to counteract the sexist tendencies so prevalent in language teaching materials.

This is useful chapter in a book that does not stop at description.

It also proposes courses of action that can be implemented at pre-service and in-service levels. Like Marland, Whyld sees the way forward in a constant review of whole school policies and organisation. Especially urgent, she argues, is the need to involve parents and the community at large.

The tide of opinion is changing: it is no longer such a rare event, for example, to find men writing on the topic of sexism in schools or to read of suggestions that might bring more boys to a realisation of the restricting pressure of sex-stereotyping on their lives. A triumvirate of educational researchers (Pratt et al, 1984), carried out, in the early eighties, an extensive project enquiring into curricular differences in secondary schools. Their study, which began five years after the Sex Discrimination Act, was intended, among other things, to monitor:

'the extent to which the Act is being implemented, both in letter and spirit, and the effect it is having on secondary schools.'

Another vitally important goal was:

'to identify and assess the practical problems which it is said preclude a free choice of curricular options by both sexes, and to examine possible solutions'.

One of their somewhat depressing conclusions was that, while the pattern of provision had changed by 1980-81, the trends in pupil choices had not altered significantly in the five years since the Act. More girls than boys were still taking subjects such as biology and languages while more boys than girls were opting for physical sciences and technical subjects. Very few schools were observed as

actively encouraging pupils to make non-traditional choices. These researchers' survey of pupil attitudes was revealing, too. Pupil presuppositions about jobs, careers, personal qualities and activities also reflected sex-stereotypical opinions.

The research carried out by Pratt and his associates was supported by the Equal Opportunities Commission. This agency was set up in 1975 with the specific task of fighting sex discrimination in society. There is, naturally, a keen interest among the ranks of its members in educational manifestations of discrimination, whether obvious - as in the much publicised cases of equality of curricular choice e.g girls' chances of taking craft subjects from which, in previous times, they were usually debarred - or indirect occurrences which, many would claim, pervade secondary school practices. Particular mention should be made of the joint action research project between the EOC and Clwyd Education Authority (Clwyd County Council, 1983). Thirty-four schools were involved with three of them subjected to microscopic analysis. There is a useful list of recommendations directed at the LEA in question but no doubt applicable to most education authorities in the country.

Another initiative of the EOC, this time in conjunction with the Inner London Education Authority, was the organisation of conference whose purpose was to explore the re-education of boys in school 'to assist in the reorientating of boys' education towards a less stereotyped image of their potential' (EOC, 1983). It was perhaps time that the term 'equal opportunities', which had come to be

associated almost exclusively with girls' and women's education, were redefined more accurately to reflect also the needs of male participants in the education process. Men have much to learn about sexism and boys are greatly disadvantaged in certain aspects of their education. Once more, however, we note that the conference overlooked modern languages, although there was a workshop on boys' underachievement in English.

The key to gender differences in school achievement and behaviour lies in the pupils' definitions of gender roles. The extent to which those roles are reinforced or denied by the organisation, provision and processes of learning in each subject must affect boys' and girls' opinions of the curriculum. In the words of Jean Stockard:

'If sex differences in academic achievement are to lessen, it will be necessary to alter the cultural definitions of academic achievement and the male self-definition which involves a compulsive need to avoid feminine roles'. (Stockard, 1980)

This holds true for any area of the curriculum, of course, but at the moment boys especially seem to be manifesting a strong impulse, a compulsive need (?) to avoid foreign language learning. Rather, they favour subjects in which their image of what it is to be male is strengthened and sustained.

CHAPTER FIVE

SEX AND GENDER DIFFERENCES IN LANGUAGE LEARNING:

MYTHS AND REALITY

(Based on Chapter 3 of Boys, Girls and Languages in School,
London: CILT, 1986)

INTRODUCTION

Until very recent times, it seems that few people viewed the issue of sex-stereotyping in foreign languages as a problem. Nevertheless, it should be apparent from a reading of Chapter 3 that concern is justified. The full consequences of the growing sex imbalance have yet to dawn on the teaching profession.

My brief inspection of some of the relevant topics in the general literature on sex differences in education in the previous chapter yielded only a handful of references specific to languages. The writings are dominated by the need to create more opportunities for girls to develop their full potential within the system. Even initiatives to rid the curriculum of sexist manifestations have tended to neglect the arts, and the language arts within them.

There is a rich field of study awaiting researchers in the area of sex differences in foreign language acquisition. A qualification in cognitive or behavioural psychology and psycholinguistics would be

desirable for potential investigators, for we really know very little about the processes of second-language learning and any differences that may exist between female and male learners at various stages of maturity. It is time, nevertheless, to examine such knowledge that exists and that relating to our special sphere will be singled out for particular attention.

The language of educational research is notorious for its speculative style and circumspection. Writing on the topic of this chapter is no exception, for example, this conclusion to a review article on innate sex differences in linguistic ability:

'We have seen that there may be sex differences in both linguistic ability and functional brain lateralization, and the two may be causally related. If the differences do exist, they may be related more to handedness than sex and may be influenced by hormonal activity, or correlated with age of maturity, or may perhaps be mostly induced by social factors.'

(Hirst, 1982, p. 110. Not my emphasis.)

With similar caution we embark on a brief review of research in the field.

BIOLOGICAL AND COGNITIVE CONSIDERATIONS

'It is obvious that girls are predestined for excellence in foreign languages. They have an innate capacity for language learning.'

This comment was among those I received from languages teachers in the free response section of a questionnaire distributed at a conference in 1985. I believe that the respondent in this case was convinced of the correctness of the view expressed. I am not sure how

the judgement was arrived at, but I suspect that it had a profound influence on that teacher's expectations of pupil performance. Anyone who studies the available evidence, however, is unlikely to produce such a confident verdict. Arguments for and against the existence of predestined biological sex differences in language potential continue to emerge but, in reality, empirical data are scant and inconclusive. Besides, as yet, to the best of my knowledge, there have been no major enquiries through cognitive psychology in the sphere of foreign language as distinct from first language acquisition. As for connections between language acquisition and second-language learning - that, too, is another virtually uncharted sea.

In most of the investigations and theories published on the topic of cognitive processes in language acquisition the sex of the learner has not been a consideration. Rubin (1981) was more concerned with research strategies for gathering information in classrooms and encouraging students to monitor their learning habits than studying the cognitive processes themselves. At least, however, she recognised the need to study these within the context of formal language teaching. So often, in reading papers on this subject, one has the impression that self-instruction under ideal conditions is the norm. Cohen, too, (1984) writes more with the intention of defending the reliability of students' verbal reports as a research tool for gaining insights into learners' mental processes in the course of language learning than with the goal of advancing our knowledge with original findings.

Naiman et al (1978) in their extensive investigations into those attributes, personal and situational, which render some people better foreign language learners than others, drew up a very useful list of potential contributory factors, but made no reference to the sex of the learner other than to identify individuals. Certainly, no differing patterns for the sexes emerged.

In an article describing a series of experiments involving the exploration of comprehension errors among language learners (native children, native adults and foreign adults), Cook (1977) postulated that the difference between the various types of learner was of degree rather than kind. As well as looking into speech processing memory - memory that enables a person to react to speech by singling out the core of sentences from within a speech flow - Cook produced a number of hypotheses relating to primary and secondary memories as they affect foreign language learning. Some of these were tested among adult EFL students, both beginners and advanced. No reference to the sex of the students was made. Among the general conclusions drawn from both the tests and the re-examination of previously offered theories was the suggestion that second language learning is like first language acquisition to the extent that the mental processes other than those involving language are not concerned. To cite the article directly:

'The more learning depends on general psychological processes, the less similar first and second language will be' (p. 17)

Cook goes on to mention some of the possible implications for teaching practice and course design but his references to structure

drills tend to date the ideas considerably. The fact that modern approaches are indeed much more likely to engage learners' 'general psychological processes' e.g. in role-play and simulations, seems not to have entered into the discussion.

Throughout Cook's article there is implied the notion that language learning has a unique set of characteristics, that, although cognitive and linguistic development are obviously interlinked in the case of first language acquisition, it is possible in second and foreign language learning to consider mental linguistic processes independent of other processes. Walsh & Diller (1978) attempted to bring together current theories of applied linguistics and neuro-scientific knowledge in order to establish which of the methods in vogue could be said to depend on particular neuro-physiological functions. They explored the neuro-physiology of language acquisition, especially the structure and function of the cerebral cortex in the hope of learning more about the processes of learning and methods of teaching language. While they offer an interesting catalogue of differences (largely surmised) between cortical loci incorporated into the learning of first and second languages, they do not extend their conjecture to include possible sex differences as well.

Witelson (1976), on the other hand, in an article aimed principally at reporting evidence for early specialisation of the right hemisphere for spatial processing among boys, suggested that this specialisation is less likely in girls, thus endowing them with a

right hemisphere that possesses greater 'plasticity' - for longer. One consequence, she argued, is that because language functions appear to transfer more readily from left to right when there has been early damage to the left hemisphere:

'females may have a lower incidence of developmental disorders associated with possible left hemisphere dysfunction.' (p. 426)

This would explain, at least in part, why males have a higher incidence than females of developmental dyslexia, developmental aphasia and autism - all of which are language based disorders. It does not, however, follow automatically that females have an innate propensity for linguistic development and further language learning which is superior to that of males.

Waber (1979) in a wide ranging chapter includes maturation rates and lateralisation of linguistic perception in her analysis. But her conclusions on the latter are extremely cautious:

'The evidence for a sex-related difference in lateralisation in the auditory system is inconclusive under the age of ten.' (p. 172)

She argues that studies intended to trace the development of such a difference must span puberty 'in order to fully describe the ontogeny of this phenomenon.'

Bryden (1979) writing in the same volume is more outspoken, and rightly so, as he reminds the reader that so much of the evidence on sex differences in cerebral organisation is grounded on the study of non-normal subjects, i.e. patients suffering from various forms of language dysfunction, and generally the focus has been not on

lateralisation theories as they might affect linguistic performance but spatial tasks. On the few occasions when language lateralisation has been studied among bilingual, as opposed to monolingual subjects, results have been inconclusive. In a brief review of research in this relatively new field of interest (Van Els et al, 1984, p. 106), it was concluded that the right hemisphere might well be more involved in the early stages of second-language acquisition (acquisition here being used in the sense of unconscious strategies for absorbing language input). On the other hand, when second-language learning takes place in formal settings, there appears to be a high degree of left hemisphere processing. Whether females would stand to gain an advantage, if these hypotheses were found to contain consistent validity, remains a matter for conjecture.

In short, therefore, there have been few sustained attempts to examine sex differences in linguistic performance from a biological or physiological perspective. One or two theories are put forward but with little concrete evidence for their justification. How any of the theories might affect a person's capacity for second-language learning remains unclear. Recent interventions by academics have tended to be dismissive or at least critical of the suppositions presented during the late sixties and early seventies.

I have already suggested that Maccoby and Jacklin share much of the responsibility for establishing the idea that girls are somehow specially endowed with superior language skills. In those test results that they examined in which girls scored higher than boys,

the experiments were generally measuring mechanical aspects of speech and language - articulation, fluency, speed and accuracy of reading, and the like. Girls aged 5-11 also seemed to be quicker at tasks involving random automatised naming of colours, objects, letters and numbers. But in other tests which might be said to have a bearing on foreign language aptitude, e.g. comprehension, recall and vocabulary tests, boys aged 6-11 fared better (Brimer, 1969). More recent tests of recall of listening comprehension produced mixed results for boys and girls (Riding & Vincent, 1980). Boys seemed to excel when speech rates quickened but otherwise girls, when not under pressure of time, performed better at all ages in the 7-15 year age-span.

In these experiments, as in the vast majority of the research, there are more variations in the results within the sexes than between them. Where differences do occur, they are seldom statistically significant. Overall, the conclusions made by Maccoby & Jacklin which led people to believe in girls' superior verbal abilities are very questionable. Furthermore, the greater proportion of the research they analysed (62%) showed no sex differences whatsoever.

Macaulay (1978) argued that female superiority in language is a myth. He dissected several sets of results emanating from studies in the sixties and seventies to prove his point. He also made reference to the variations that occur in similar tests with children from different cultures. To claim the existence of innate sex differences, similar results should be observable across different societies and cultures, and universally acknowledged. This is most

certainly not the case. Girls and boys perform in differing ways in different countries. In this respect it is interesting to note that in cross-national studies of sex differences in, for example, reading abilities, England has been cited as being one of the countries where, untypically, boys gain better scores than girls (Johnson, 1975; Finn et al., 1979). Stockard (1980) also reminds us that results vary considerably from country to country. Reading achievement scores for the two sexes seem prone to fluctuation across the world, with many more boys than girls frequenting remedial reading classes in Germany, Canada, the United States and, in direct contrast to the above, Great Britain.

There are, undoubtedly, discrepancies and weaknesses in the ways in which generalised data such as these have been collected and interpreted. Macaulay has gone so far as to suggest that the personal integrity of some researchers is questionable. He wrote:

'Most investigators have been so convinced of the linguistic superiority of girls that they have looked at the evidence with a rather jaundiced eye. As a result, they have exaggerated reports of slight differences in favour of girls into convincing proof of female superiority.' (Macaulay, 1978, p. 358)

Macaulay's conclusion that

'In the present state of language assessment the only tenable position is that there is no significant difference between the sexes in linguistic ability' (p. 361)

has not deterred other writers from reiterating the conventional and popular wisdom; that is, perpetuating the myth of female superiority. The seemingly authoritative volume Sex-related differences in cognitive functioning (Wittig & Peterson, (eds) 1979) tends to do

just this, in parts reproducing Maccoby & Jacklin almost word for word. Bryden, in a chapter on 'Sex differences in cerebral organisation' is fortunately a little more judicious than some of her co-writers when summarising:

'Despite the intense interest in cerebral lateralisation in recent years, relatively few studies on normal subjects have examined the possibility of there being sex-related differences in cerebral representation. Of those that have, many can be criticised for poor procedures, lack of replicability, or small samples. At present, it is difficult to see any striking patterns emerging. Any conclusions rest on one's choice of which studies to emphasize and which to ignore.' (Bryden, 1979, p. 137)

Klann-Delius (1981) took up her own critical stance to judge whether a person's sex influences her or his ability to acquire and learn language. Restricting her analysis to a developmental psycholinguistic aspect, she wrote separately about the classical components of language: phonology, syntax and semantics. She also considered the acquisition of pragmatic rules and the development of communicative competence in the first language. She, too, reached the conclusion that most of the claims of innate sex differences made previously were controversial. She wrote:

'The empirical investigations do not admit to the drawing of any reasonable conclusion about the influence of sex on children's language acquisition.' (p. 9)

She illustrated many of the methodological inadequacies that have characterised the majority of the studies and warned of the risks in measuring total linguistic ability from isolated features of linguistic performance. For too long, she argued, people have associated difference automatically with deficit. She urged for more meticulous research that would bring about what she called:

'a productive dismantling of the stereotype which assumes that one

sex is better than the other in linguistic matters.' (p. 19)

Hirst (1982) concentrated on brain symmetry, handedness, age of maturity and endocrine influence - the role of hormones - in his evaluation of research evidence. He rejects most findings as inconclusive. His caution in interpreting the results of others is exemplary. He suggests, for example, that the exact nature of the sex differing abilities...

'may not be "pure" verbal or spatial ability but something different and yet related enough to show up on many tests of those abilities, or they may be wholly artifacts of testing'. (p. 98)

The applicability of research in cognitive psychology to foreign language learning situations is then arguable. It is rare to find studies in which the sex of the learner is a variable when measuring the outcomes of instruction, though this pattern is changing with the rapidly increasing interest in the differing fortunes of the sexes. Rarer still are the studies which, in addition, have been conducted in settings that bear some resemblance to British school classrooms. The most common sector used for the investigations tends to be adult or higher education.

In many studies no significant sex differences were obtained. Walker & Perry (1978), for example, found nothing to support arguments that one sex is better than the other in their monitoring of 200 female and 200 male 18-22 year-old students of English as a second language.

The subjects under scrutiny by Hansen & Stansfield (1982) were 236 students enrolled on an introductory Spanish course at an American

University. These writers were particularly interested in the variations between the 113 men and 123 women in preferred ways of perceiving, organising, analysing and recalling language; in short, their cognitive styles. They further categorised their learners by means of a test measuring field dependence (FD) and field independence (FI), i.e. tendencies to rely primarily on external or internal frames of reference in processing information. The instructors, six in all, were also subjected to the same tests. According to their analysis of results, following a battery of achievement tests after six months' instruction, the researchers claimed that the most marked relationship between variables was the contrast in performance between FI females and FD males with FI instructors. Apparently the FI female group showed itself better able to study independently and to synthesize material - a prerequisite of most undergraduate ab initio foreign language programmes in my experience. Student-teacher interpersonal factors were not ruled out, but the results for the FI women's performance were significantly higher ($p < 0.1$) in all elements of the testing, final written examination, oral tests and cloze tests.

Williams (1981) worked in Nigeria among four groups of primary and secondary pupils aged between 8 and 18 years. He tested the reading performance in English as a second language in terms of comprehension and reading rate of 178 boys and 190 girls. In this study the results indicated that sex was one of the least important predictor variables. In fact, boys did better than girls in the tests in some of the mixed schools. Following a closer analysis of school types and

the performance of the sexes, Williams argued that the results pointed to:

'some kind of interaction between sex and and sociocultural factors associated with academic performance in general and reading in particular.' (p. 47)

It certainly has been found that the socio-cultural setting in which the school operates can have a dramatic effect on pupils' attitudes towards the curriculum they receive. Whether those attitudes have so direct an influence on the performance levels in certain of the activities is a question which continues to occupy the minds of educational researchers.

Cross (1981 & 1983) conducted a small scale (involving only two London schools) but intriguing investigation into the effects of a delayed start in learning French at secondary level. He produced a comprehensive battery of tests which were applied to the 14-16 year olds in his own school where this experiment was being run and another control group in a nearby school. In both settings boys achieved higher mean scores in all the tests of reading and listening comprehension. Cross, recognising that in Britain boys are generally regarded as less efficient language learners than girls, speculated that since, by chance, among the language department staff there were, untypically, equal numbers of men and women, the boys had more positive role models than usual and therefore performed better. This is an issue to which I shall return in Chapters 6 & 7.

It is certainly more usual to find girls producing better results in tests of foreign language performance. Nisbet & Welsh (1972), in a

local evaluation of French in the first two years of secondary schooling, found girls having consistently better scores than boys. On a much larger scale altogether, the N.F.E.R. longitudinal evaluation of primary school French (Burstall, 1970; Burstall et al, 1974) discovered a similar pattern emerging both at primary and secondary school levels. The most marked sex differences in achievement occurred among pupils at the lower end of the socio-economic scale, thus adding weight to the argument that socio-economic expectations affect young boys' general academic, and specifically linguistic, attainment to considerable degree.

Perhaps the most thorough review of foreign language attainment among school children conducted recently - and undoubtedly the most relevant to our present discussions - was that conducted by N.F.E.R. for the Assessment of Performance Unit (A.P.U.). This national assessment of levels of performance was initiated, as far as foreign languages are concerned, in 1983 when nearly 5000 pupils across England, Wales and Northern Ireland were tested as they were nearing the end of their second year of learning either French, German or Spanish as first foreign language. All four language skills were tested. A full description of the tests and detailed analysis of results can be found in A.P.U. (1985). There was also a test of English language and an attitude survey. (The latter will be referred to again later in this chapter). Results were reported and discussed mostly for the population as a whole, irrespective of sex. However, the scores of pupils taking the various combinations of tests were divided into three 'performance bands'. The process by which this

division took place also permitted a comparison of the distribution of boys and girls within each band. At least, therefore, a general idea of the differing performances of the sexes emerged. The conclusion to this section of the report reads:

'In all areas of foreign language assessment there are high proportions of girls in the high band, and the pattern is similar in each language. The difference is smallest in speaking and greatest in writing. The differences in French range from 1%-6%, in German from 5%-14%, and in Spanish from 11%-14%.' (A.P.U., 1985, p. 293)

The monitoring team in their objective presentation of data did not speculate as to the causes of this discrepancy which, although not enormous, was noticeable in each of the three languages. Without closer scrutiny of the test items themselves and tracking down the original source of the different scores, any speculation on my part is also inappropriate, not to say unwise.

In 1984, a further monitoring of pupils' foreign language performance at 13+ was carried out, this time, however, only in French. (A.P.U., 1986). There were 5426 pupils completing tests which were similar in purpose and design to the previous set. Table 31 illustrates a comparison of the standardised mean scores of boys and girls in each of the four language skill areas.

TABLE 31: BOYS' AND GIRLS' PERFORMANCE IN FRENCH:

A.P.U. 1984 SURVEY

Girls' scores for reading, writing and listening were significantly higher than boys'. In speaking, the difference did not reach the level of statistical significance. Results were also analysed by a

number of other variables of school type including whether single-sex or coeducational. Only one difference was found to be statistically significant in this respect: girls in girls' schools had a higher mean score in listening than girls in mixed establishments. Again, no reasons were suggested for this interesting detail.

International studies of foreign language achievement also highlight the fact that girls are more likely to reach higher scores than boys, but only in some countries. For example, a student's sex contributed variance in the performance of certain language skills, listening and reading in the main, in Carroll's study of French as a foreign language in eight countries (Carroll, 1975).

In the significant cases, girls were always better overall. Interestingly, the pattern of results demonstrated that the 'femininity' stereotype was most in evidence in English-speaking countries included in his survey: England, Scotland, United States. But, for some curious reason, similar trends were observable in Chile.

In conclusion to this section on biological and cognitive considerations, we must acknowledge that the sex of the learner can be an important variable in performance in foreign language. However, even when 'biological' differences are found, even lateralisation anomalies, we should recognise that socialisation may have played a crucial role in their formation. The practice of skills associated with assigned or assumed sex-roles affects cognitive as

well as physical growth and can influence performance accordingly. It was Nash (1979) who pointed out that reading is perceived by children in the United States as a feminine activity, and that boys who perceive it as more feminine have been found to be somewhat poorer readers. I am not arguing that inferior foreign language performance scores of boys in this country are predetermined by a perception of foreign-language learning as a feminine area of activity. It may hold true, nonetheless, that their 'socialisation' into mechanical, manual, numerical and scientific things means that, almost by default, the practice of language-related activities, including foreign language, does not benefit from the same specialised form of cognitive development.

AFFECTIVE CONSIDERATIONS

Do boys and girls approach their first experience of foreign-language learning with entirely open minds? Probably not. Tenuous claims about biological differences and deficits are in themselves highly emotive and susceptible to abuse and misuse. Far more significant are those attributes of an individual's personality and perceptions which bear upon her or his willingness to be educated and the degree of motivation to persevere with a learning task.

Let us accept, for a moment, the validity of those research studies that suggest that there are differences between the sexes in terms of brain lateralisation and cognitive styles and, even at the risk of

producing a biased set of principles, deliberately reject those in which no differences were found or those which actually allowed males to dominate: the degree of difference between the sexes is of little import when we place it in the context of strong environmental influence and the overwhelming effects of socialisation processes. Even theories such as differing rates of maturity need to take account of the possibility that the practice of skills associated with recognisable and long-standing sex-roles can actually serve to influence the development of those same skills and the cognitive functions that help to bring them about.

Successful foreign language learning in the formal context of a secondary school classroom is dependent on many factors. Among the learner variables in empirical research studies of foreign language acquisition, factors such as intelligence (Genesee, 1978), aptitude (Green, 1975; Bialystok & Frohlich, 1978; Buckby, 1981) and memory (Stevick, 1976; Melvin & Rivers, 1976) have regularly been under consideration. Societal factors such as parental support (Green, 1975; Zamir, 1981), socio-economic grouping (Burstall et al., 1974) and teacher-pupil interaction (Wragg, 1970; Bailey, 1975; Partington, 1981; Allwright, 1984; Westgate et al., 1985) have also, justifiably, been the subject of much debate. However, discussions on language teaching methodology have tended recently to bring to the fore the affective variables which advance or constrain learning (Gardner, 1980; Krashen & Terrill, 1983; Gardner, Lalonde & Pierson, 1983; Gregg, 1984; Gardner, 1985).

Over the past ten years or so, language teachers have increasingly rejected the highly structured approaches of audio-visual or audio-lingual methods whose development was underpinned by behaviourist psychology. With the emphasis now less on formal repetition and pattern practice of grammatical and syntactical items and more on communicative goals and the comprehension of authentic language, classroom activities are now more likely to make demands on pupils' willingness to absorb the foreign culture and to emulate and identify with the speakers of the target language. It seems timely, therefore, to examine what is known in the parlance of humanistic psychology as the 'affective domain'. The focus must now be on the learner as a whole person, and primarily an emotional being.

There are various personality traits likely to influence language learning: extroversion - introversion, anxiety - confidence, empathy - ethnocentricity, perseverance - irresolution, interest - apathy, to name merely a few. All these and many other human qualities help to determine a person's attitudes towards education in general and school and school subjects in particular.

A useful three-dimensional summary of beliefs about attitudes, especially as they may affect a foreign language learner, is provided by Van Els et al. (1984). I have expanded these slightly in the following categorisation:

- 1) A cognitive component which refers to one's belief about the

subject. (e.g. degree of usefulness, relevance, applicability to one's own aspirations)

2) An affective component which refers to the amount of positive or negative feeling one has

a) towards the subject. (e.g. like or dislike for the phonology and form of the language being studied)

b) towards the native speakers of the foreign language. (i.e. known individuals or media images of famous personalities)

c) towards the society and culture of speakers of the foreign language. (i.e. genuine, first-hand knowledge or stereotypes)

3) A conative component which refers to one's behavioural intentions, or to one's actual behaviour towards the subject. (e.g. priorities and preferences for the language skills or sense of self-worth in performing the skills)

It would be true to say that most attitudinal research in this field has tended to concentrate on attitudes towards the target language and target language speakers. There has been comparatively little work done on ascertaining learners' attitudes to the process itself, the subject matter and content of lessons and the teacher and characteristic teaching styles. These are areas which I have explored to some degree in Chapters 6 & 7.

Measuring attitudes accurately is not the easiest branch of social science research. Those being surveyed usually indicate their level

of agreement with a variety of statements, both positive and negative, about the subject under scrutiny by ticking boxes or ringing numbers in a series. The way the sentences are framed, the sequence in which they occur, even the format in which they are printed may influence an individual's reactions. As for the respondents themselves, the way they complete the questionnaire will reflect a momentary opinion which may well be different had the document been presented the following week, the next day - even five minutes later. Also, when it comes to asking questions which are intended to isolate sex differences (however subtly) the strength of opinion which reflects same-sex, peer-group identity should not be underestimated. Some pupils may find it impossible to distinguish between loyalty to their own sex and their true feelings about, for example, the performance of the opposite sex. It is essential, therefore, when reporting research, at least to bear these limitations in mind, as well as monitoring carefully the numbers involved. Most frequently, in research into language teaching, it appears that validity and reliability have to be taken on trust. It is rare to come across research, the results of which have been subjected to rigorous statistical procedures or which can claim to be statistically representative, to be a fair reflection of the total population's view. In the field of foreign language education in Britain, such large-scale research is virtually non-existent.

Links between attitudes and proficiency in language learning are well-established (Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Burstall, 1974; A.P.U. 1986), although it must be acknowledged that there have been some

recent challenges and questions raised about the validity of these and other findings (Oller & Perkins, 1978; Oller, 1981). The problem for us is that the majority of investigations have been carried out among adult learners (Naiman et al., 1978), students in higher education (Ake, 1982; Gardner et al., 1983; Ludwig, 1982), among very young children (Stern & Weinrib, 1977; Freudenstein, 1979; Strong, 1984) or under learning conditions that bear little resemblance to the classrooms of British secondary comprehensive schools - which are, of course, our particular focus. There have been studies in bi-cultural settings (Oller et al., 1979; Muchnick & Wolfe, 1982), bilingual socio-cultural settings (Clement et al., 1977; Gardner & Smythe, 1981) or during language immersion programmes (Tucker, Hamayan & Genesee, 1976; Genesee & Hamayan, 1980). The vast majority of this research has been carried out in Canada and the United States. Foreign language education in Britain does not have such a rich variety of support.

In one or two cases, sex differences within the results have been explored. Bartley (1970), expressing anxiety about the drop-out rate among Californian high school advanced students of French, German and Spanish, surveyed attitudes twice using a 30-item scale. The sharp increase in drop-out coincided with the relaxing of foreign language study requirements in the 6th, 7th and 8th grades, and it is no surprise that the instrumental motivation factor was of prime importance in her analysis of results. Equally predictable was her conclusion that those who had dropped out had significantly less positive attitudes than those who stayed on course. However, of

special interest here is the finding that the girls in both the continuing and drop-out groups achieved significantly higher attitude scores than the boys. Attitudes worsened most, over the six months separating the two applications of the questionnaires, among the drop-out boys.

Bartley's research, so typical of work in the field, involved pupils in only two junior high schools. However, one major survey in Britain that did involve large numbers of pupils was that conducted into the teaching of French in primary schools in the late sixties and early seventies by Burstall and associates. The repercussions of that study are only too well known to language teachers. Burstall's conclusion that

'the weight of the evidence has combined with the balance of opinion to tip the scales against a possible expansion of the teaching of French in primary schools' (Burstall et al., 1974, p. 246).

was the signal to LEAs up and down the country to phase out French in their primary schools. Criticisms were made at the time about the validity of some of the achievement tests used and the lack of consideration of factors other than achievement which ought to be taken into account when making decisions about curricula (Buckby, 1976). But what interests me here is the considerable evidence of sex differences, not just in most of the performance tests, but in attitudes to French and the French. These were already well established by the age of eleven. In most items that gauged reactions to the language, culture and lesson contents, girls had a distinctly more favourable outlook than boys. Boys were also more likely to express the view that they should be concentrating their efforts on

subjects that had a more obvious and direct relevance to their future employment prospects, particularly those boys who were finding the work hard. Another important difference was reflected in the stronger desire among girls to establish contact and communicate with French people. A similar pattern emerges in my own analysis of teachers' and pupils' opinions in Chapters 7 and 8 respectively.

That children's attitudes were firmly rooted so early, and, as far as boys were concerned, so antagonistic to French, may not now appear so surprising. It had a dramatic impact on the profession at the time, all the same. The association between attitudes and achievement was undeniable. That link is complex but one of Burstall's main claims, undeniably sound from her analysis of other elements of the research, was that positive attitudes are, to a large extent, an outcome, a product of the second language learning process. In other words, there is nothing like success for breeding the conditions in which further success is more likely. Attitudes alter anyway, of course, as one matures, but the extent to which schools can counteract prejudice against things and people foreign - prejudice akin to xenophobia at times - is debatable.

The primary school classes, if not all the secondary classes, in Burstall's survey were mixed. In the same year as the final volume of her research report was published, Dale produced his third volume of a detailed examination of the educational experiences of pupils in mixed and single-sex schools (Dale, 1974). French was one of the subjects singled out for special mention with regard to pupil

attitudes. Girls, overall, were more favourably disposed to learn French than boys. Girls' liking for French steadily increased between the ages of 11 and 15, more in mixed than single-sex schools though. On the other hand, boys in boys' schools showed an appreciably greater interest in French than those in mixed schools and at the age of 15 this difference was statistically significant for all social classes.

More specifically interested in differences between mixed and single-sex schools as they affect uptake in French, Beswick (1976) monitored two cohorts of pupils in seven boys' schools and eight mixed schools in order to ascertain the polarisation of pupils' attitudes and achievements. He concluded that the more positive disposition manifested by the girls appeared to be particularly accentuated in mixed teaching arrangements.

Morris (1978) examined the attitudes to French at the transition point between middle school (9-13 years) and high school (13-18 years) of 374 pupils in the north of England. Whereas boys' attitudes were never really very positive and declined after transfer, he also found that the more favourable attitudes of girls likewise declined as their ethnocentricity increased with age. In other words, they became far more interested in their own identity and culture as they moved into the senior school.

Buckby (1981), also working in the north of England, turned his attention to lesson content, methodology and assessment procedures.

In particular, he was commissioned to study the effects of the implementation of teaching French by graded objectives. The aptitude and attitude survey involved some 1200 pupils in their second and third years of learning French. One of the principal successes of this innovation, he claimed, was the manifestation of more positive attitudes in teachers and learners and a notably narrowing of the traditional gap between boys' and girls' attitude scores.

Eardley (1984) surveyed the opinions of 388 sixth-form students in Wales in an attempt to identify the main reasons for the failure of languages to attract recruits to Advanced level courses. For many of the stated reasons there were noticeable sex differences, but no tests of statistical significance were applied. The most frequently cited reasons for not continuing were 'not a useful subject for future career' and 'did not combine well with other subjects chosen'. In the former the differences were minimal but the poor combination of subjects and general dislike featured more prominently among the boys' responses. Antipathy towards the literary element in Advanced level work, another reason for discontinuing language courses, was slightly more manifest among the boys. Of course, in many cases, the results of studies at this level are governed by, and confirm, decisions made much earlier in a pupil's schooling, usually at, or even before, the stage at which foreign language study becomes optional.

In an earlier study on motivational factors for studying French at secondary and tertiary levels (Albani & Sewell, 1979) it was found that female students were more likely to remain on course for reasons to do with simply liking the subject (57.9% of females in contrast to 52% of males) but the numbers of respondents in this investigation were, once again, small (350 altogether).

Her Majesty's Inspectors (H.M.I., 1985a) were able to interview 560 fourth-year boys in their survey of schools with a relatively high uptake in languages. They talked to those who had chosen to continue with a modern language, those who had opted out and those who were obliged to take a language in the fourth year. Apparently, certain features of foreign language learning were singled out as enjoyable by the boys irrespective of whether they were continuing with a language or not. Oral work had almost universal appeal. Least popular aspects were written work, grammar, learning verbs and uninteresting books. Among those who had opted in, the main reasons cited are given in Table 32.

TABLE 32: REASONS FOR CONTINUING WITH A FOREIGN LANGUAGE:

H.M.I. SURVEY DURING 1983

These 'findings' tend to confirm the notion that early success in learning a language is, in all probability, going to lead to a more positive desire to continue with the subject. They demonstrate also the importance of 'selling' languages as relevant to careers. Most of all, they illustrate how pupils (in this case boys, but the same

must be true for girls too) respond positively to stimulating teaching and enjoyable lesson content. In brief, the affective dimension is the key to improving the uptake of pupils for language courses. It is, after all, human nature to wish to prolong pleasurable experiences.

What the boys in the H.M.I. survey enjoyed most of all were activities designed to promote oral proficiency. In Chapter 2, I argued that boys were, on the contrary, more likely to shun oral practice. In the light of the evidence more recently accrued, should I now amend this view? Or had the teachers in the survey schools found a new, more exhilarating formula for oral exploitation of language? My observation of language classes over recent years informs me that there have been changes, induced in part by course-book writers' initiatives, but mostly by a new sense of freedom among language teachers now that the rigidity of audio-visual and audio-lingual routines has been cast aside. We are not, therefore talking about the same kind of oral practice. Contemporary approaches offer more scope for pupil autonomy and it is this, I suspect, which is highly prized by today's language learners.

In a detailed case-study of one Nottinghamshire mixed comprehensive school, O'Brien (1985) also found that 'speaking French' did not appear to be less popular with boys than with girls. He does however qualify this by adding:

'Whereas speaking French in front of a large class audience may be an ordeal, to a small group of one's peers it may be an enjoyable activity.' (p. 62)

In a much larger survey of pupil attitudes involving 953 second-year pupils in six mixed comprehensive schools in the south-west of England, (Powell & Batters, 1985) the attitude scale administered encompassed five sub-categories, namely:

- * importance of the foreign language
- * ethnocentricity
- * self-image
- * attitudes towards writing
- * attitudes towards oral work

Girls, in line with previous pilot studies, scored higher but the least difference in scores occurred in those aspects reflecting opinions about oral work, thus adding weight to the descriptive evidence accumulated by H.M.I. The positive attitudes expressed by girls to oral work were shared by most of the boys in the sample. In one school boys actually had a marginally better opinion of oral work than girls.

Eighteen months after this survey, the same cohort of pupils were questioned for a second time. An important question in the minds of the researchers was whether the enthusiasm for oral work expressed at the beginning of the second year would extend into the final weeks of the third year. When the results were processed, it was found that the difference between girls and boys in attitude scores relating to oral activities had, in fact, diminished. In the second year the gap between mean scores had been 0.4 (significant at $p=0.01$). The

variance at the end of the third year, however, was extremely small (0.028) and no longer statistically significant. The opportunity to speak the foreign language in the course of learning may well represent the main redeeming feature of language lessons for some pupils.

The A.P.U. surveys of foreign language performance at 13+ had also focussed on pupils' attitudes. The team of researchers commissioned to carry out the work developed a Likert type scale containing four main sub-constructs:

- * the usefulness of learning a foreign language
- * the enjoyment derived from it
- * the perceived difficulty of foreign learning
- * the wish for contact with members of the foreign language community

There were some noteworthy differences between the sexes in both the 1983 and 1984 surveys (A.P.U., 1985 & 1986) in all four areas. Summarising, these would seem to be most pronounced in relation to degrees of enjoyment and overall, in each language group, the proportion of girls with high scores was greater than the boys, the differences reaching statistical significance in a number of sections. There was considerable consistency in the pattern of results for both years.

In addition to the four main parts of the scale above, the questionnaire contained two statements inviting reactions on sex

specific aspects of language learning potential:

I think that girls and boys are equally good at French/German/Spanish

I think that girls are normally better at French/German/Spanish than boys

It could, of course, be argued that the exclusion of a statement suggesting that boys are better than girls was an unwise omission. Nonetheless, the general conclusion derived from scrutinizing the responses led the researchers to write:

'many pupils of this age do not share the commonly held view that girls are more successful at foreign languages than boys.'
(A.P.U., 1985, p. 383)

A similar conclusion was reached after the 1984 survey. As will be seen shortly, in the next chapter, my own investigations among 12-14 year-olds have yielded analogous results.

In this chapter, I have reviewed a considerable amount of research in the literature and commented thereon where I have deemed it warranted a critical or supporting observation. It is sometimes difficult to isolate fact from fiction, myths from reality, especially, maybe, in educational research. In an area of human potential and performance in which speculation abounds and generalisations beget further generalisations, the need for caution is paramount. There seems to be insufficient clear-cut proof to support the hypothesis that there is an innate capacity for language or foreign language learning which

might favour one sex more than the other. Yet foreign language learning in society and as part of the school curriculum has acquired an image that often leads people to conclude otherwise. The predispositions of pupils at the start of their secondary school education are bound to be the result of socio-psychological influences and pressures stretching back through childhood. It is irrefutable that when children's progress in languages is assessed, girls tend to perform better than boys in the early stages. Among older students, the picture is less well defined. A consideration of attitudinal variations regularly provides 'proof' that girls are more kindly disposed to the processes necessary to acquire a foreign language. This, too, may be just one by-product of more general sex-stereotyping of roles and behaviour expectations. The effects of these gender-related inclinations, expectations and aspirations on the outcomes of foreign language instruction require more substantial and more rigorous research.

CHAPTER SIX

PERSONAL INVESTIGATIONS: 1981-1983

Part 1: The Pilot Project

The first school-based research in the cycle of activities which will be detailed in this chapter was a pilot project involving 337 third-year pupils in two mixed comprehensive schools during April and May in 1981. This was intended primarily to refine a questionnaire in two stages prior to more extensive application at a later date. The survey was also intended to investigate whether any correlation could be found between attitudes to various facets of learning French and other factors such as a pupil's sex, social class, whether or not the pupil intended to continue with the subject in the fourth year, the sort of job the pupil expected to do on leaving school and, finally, whether the pupil had ever visited France. Full details of the processes by which the data was analysed and the data itself can be found in Littlewood (1981). A discussion of the results and their implications for the schools concerned forms the focus of the article *Why choose French? Boys' and girls' attitudes at the option stage* (Powell & Littlewood, 1983). There follows now a summary of the main results, together with comments on some of the items which I contributed in the subsequent article. Further reflections, especially on the instrumental reasons for selecting French as an

examination subject, have already been included in Chapter 2.

In both schools, the number of girls opting for French in the fourth year was significantly higher than the boys. The French attitude scale within the questionnaire was based on that developed by Morris (1978). It was found that boys consistently scored higher than the girls on items measuring their ethnocentricity, indicating, thus, that they had a much less positive attitude to France and the French language than the girls. Girls were more confident in their opinion of French as it affected themselves, holding the view that they could and would master the subject; boys were much less optimistic. When it came to reasons for opting for French, more boys than girls ticked negative or purely instrumental suggestions. e.g. because of the need to find another subject to fill the time-table or requiring another subject at examination level in order to pursue higher courses of study. Girls were more enthusiastic about and enjoyed written work more than the boys in both schools but differences between the sexes in respect of oral work were minimal.

A major surprise was that, overall, social class, as measured by the Registrar General's scale of five socio-economic groupings, played no significant role in the distribution of attitude scores. While there was the expected uneven distribution of social classes across the ability sets, with the top sets comprising a disproportionate number of children from the professional grades and pupils of semi-skilled or unskilled parental occupation represented in larger numbers in the lower sets, attitude scores were relatively evenly distributed.

Part of the information that the questionnaire was designed to collect involved a pupil response on pupil opinion towards French as a girls' subject. A question to that effect was among the reasons provided for opting out - obviously, primarily directed at the disillusioned boys in the sample. Of the responses obtained, the vast majority (86.6%) did not select this as one of the reasons for abandoning French. This type of direct questioning on the 'gender perception' of the subject was considered worthy of further study during later surveys.

All pupils were asked to indicate if they had ever visited France. It was discovered that pupils who had visited the country opted for the further study of French in greater numbers than those who had not. But a word of caution is necessary here lest one jumps to the conclusion that a mere visit to the country of the target language will enhance the chances of increasing the number of those continuing with the foreign language. It is quite possible that this simple correlation is masking favourable family attitudes and financial means which present some pupils with such opportunities. Pupils who are thus encouraged to take advantage of the chance to go on organised visits are, no doubt, already advantaged by the positive expectations and attitudes of the home background and the effect on their general approach to learning a foreign language should not be underestimated.

Many pupils took the opportunity in the free response sections of the

questionnaire to add their own personal comments. It was here that more positive views were expressed, particularly by girls, in terms that had little to do with future prospects or the detailed items on language learning skills presented elsewhere on the questionnaire. Invitations to pupils to state in vague terms their liking for or dislike of French had been studiously avoided. And yet many pupils, girls especially, felt the need to provide that basic information - often with the simplest of expressions such as 'I just like French', or 'French suits me'.

More negative statements, made usually by boys, were also to find their way into the free response section following reasons for not continuing with the language. Many of these were enlightening; some were terse and to the point with the occasional use of vulgar qualifiers for emphasis, unprintable here!

With over a third of the pupils adding comments that provided some fascinating insights into their overall experience of learning a foreign language, it was considered important to allow for this possibility in future questionnaires. Indeed, comments collected in the course of the various surveys I have conducted have become a rich source of enlightenment, encouragement and, admittedly, despair.

Part 2: The Second 3rd Year Survey

Background

In June 1983, an improved and extended version of the questionnaire used in the second stage of the pilot project was administered in three mixed comprehensive schools. Changes from the earlier design were largely confined to rewording of some items and the inclusion of additional possible reasons for opting in or out of a language. A copy of this questionnaire can be found in Appendix A.

The timing of the introduction of this questionnaire into schools was crucial since it was important to match schools at the moment when pupils had just made their option choices for fourth year subjects. It was disappointing not to have been able to include more schools in the research at this stage, but the autonomy that schools enjoy in matters of internal organisation and administration is not always an advantage to the educational researcher.

In all, 226 boys and 239 girls were involved. Of the three schools, one was a split-site, city comprehensive, the other two served the needs of two small country towns. Results were analysed by school but not found to reveal major variations. The socio-economic groupings within the schools were similar as were the patterns of organisation for foreign language provision and the ratio of female to male staff (3:1).

The questionnaire was in two parts. The first, presented and completed separately, identified pupils and questioned them on their subject preferences. This provided a general picture, free from bias, of pupils' views on foreign languages within the whole curriculum. Pupils were unaware of the existence of the second part which enquired specifically about languages. The pupils were in their mixed tutor groups while completing the questionnaires which were introduced in all cases by myself. All these measures were planned in order to minimize the possibility of extraneous influences affecting pupils' responses, such as their presenting answers which they deemed most acceptable to the researcher (the approval motive).

RESULTS

a) Subject Preference

Pupils were invited to name three subjects which they liked in the sequence: 'most favourite' - 'next favourite' - 'also like'. Similar opportunities were offered to state three disliked subjects with the cues: 'least favourite' - 'strong disliking for' - 'also dislike'. Space was provided after each subject listed for a couple of sentences to be added explaining their selection. Occasionally, there were more original insights than the usual all-embracing adjectives

'interesting' and 'boring'.

In subjects which were liked these tended to reflect:

i) notions of personal freedom:

e.g. 'because I like doing my own topic work and writing sketches and plays'.

ii) notions of variety:

e.g. 'because we have films, go on visits and hear about lots of different places and people'.

iii) notions of active involvement:

e.g. 'because we do a lot of practical things, get out of doors and do things'.

iv) notions of challenge:

e.g. 'because it taxes my brain! I like figuring things out'.

When languages were seen in a positive light, those pupils who made such comments seemed able to relate the learning directly to contact with foreigners. For example:

Contact with foreigners

e.g. 'I enjoy having a pen-pal and speaking and writing in a foreign language'

'I have been to Paris and want to learn more about French people'

This coincides with the findings of the A.P.U. monitoring team who discovered that pupils who had visited France not only had performed better on the tests of attainment but also displayed distinctly more positive attitudes. (APU, 1986) (But see also comment in Part One of this chapter.)

Another set of comments seemed to reflect long-term, and sometimes

quite vague, expectations:

Long-term possibilities

e.g. 'because I may need it in years to come'
'because French might be handy when talking to a foreign person where you work'
'because I may decide to live abroad when I leave school. Who knows?'

As will be seen in the analysis of results of reasons for opting for a language, even among those who had not ranked a language among their top three favourite subjects, these future speculations were of some significance.

It is much more difficult to categorise negative responses across the various subjects listed as unpopular. Pupils covered a lot of paper expressing dislike! No subject on the curriculum remained unscathed. Most adverse comments were reserved for the subject teachers themselves, a point that reinforces the need for teachers to build up good working relationships with the groups that they teach. As for languages, at this stage of the questionnaire, preceeding more detailed remarks about language learning demanded in the second part, it seems that the commonest themes to emerge included the following. (Examples of pupils' responses are reproduced verbatim)

i) notions of difficulty,

a) in general terms:

'it's too much like hard work'
'theres just to much to learn'

b) relating to specific aspects of language:

'to many hard words to speak and say, to many verb changes'
'because I find the various cases difficult to understand and when to use them'
'I cannot remember all the different tenses'
'I cant get the grammar side'

ii) notions of inadequacy or confusion:

'I can't cope with the speaking part of it'
'I can't pick the words up quickly enough'
'I find it hard to cope and very rarely get things right'
'because I get mixed up and we have an awful class'
'I dont understand a word shes on about and she doesnt explain things'
'Sometimes the teacher babbles on thinking you understand, and I dont'

iii) notions of irrelevance:

'I can get along without it even in France'
'because you don't really need it to be a farmer'
'it wont be of no use to me'
'my dad's never spoken French and he's done all right'

Languages did not feature much among preferred subjects. Only 30 pupils (6.5%) ranked it as most favourite subject. Of these, only three were boys. Adding up the number of tallies among the 'positive' and 'negative' selections, the popularity and unpopularity of languages is derived (see Tables 33 and 34). In all three schools there were some students studying both French and German in the third year. In one school, a group of 25 able students were studying Latin as a second language. All languages have been grouped together for analysis for the present purposes. The sex differences within these figures speak for themselves.

TABLE 33: POPULARITY OF A FOREIGN LANGUAGE:

3 SCHOOLS - 1983

TABLE 34: UNPOPULARITY OF A FOREIGN LANGUAGE:

3 SCHOOLS - 1983

These schools could all be said to have a strong commitment to foreign language education. 73.5% of the children had been abroad by the time they had reached the third form, 40% of them having been on trips and exchanges organised by the language departments themselves. All three schools could also rightly boast a reasonably good record of success in examination results (above the national average) and a take-up rate (at 64% on average) which was exceptionally good. Yet the degree to which languages are liked (only 6.5% considering it worthy of favourite subject status) and disliked (15.3% classifying it as least favourite and 37% expressing some dislike) caused the teaching staff in these schools to be more than a little disturbed by the results.

However, by offering a summary of the areas in which antipathy had been expressed to the teachers in the language departments, it was hoped that some progress could be made to make the learning of a language both a more successful and a more enjoyable experience for all concerned.

The only really unusual feature in the tables is the small number of girls who rated a language as second favourite or second disliked subject. It is impossible to tell whether this was a sign of reluctance on their part to express an even more emphatic opinion or an accurate measure of their strength of feeling about the subjects. Boys' preferences were more evenly distributed across the three categories.

b) Ability Sets

All three schools operated a system of fine setting in the third year. The data collected show clearly the sex imbalance within the six year-groups. Figures are provided for French only, as the dominant language; other languages were invariably restricted to children in the top sets. One consequence of this was that very few boys were studying two languages, only one in five of them having been offered the chance in the first place.

TABLE 35: DISTRIBUTION OF THE SEXES ACROSS THE ABILITY SETS:

3 SCHOOLS - 1983

The point about the sex imbalance in top sets has already been touched on at several junctures in this thesis. These particular results were instrumental in prompting me to carry out the much larger survey which is reported in more detail later this chapter.

The preponderance of boys in the fourth tier seems worthy of comment. In many ways, that level of operating seems to be, at least in these schools, the 'sink' set for boys. It is suggested that here could be found the boys of average and even above average ability who had become totally disenchanted with languages and were failing to perform in a manner consistent with their real potential.

(I add, by way of a personal note that I made it my duty to explore

for myself what it meant to be a teacher in charge of such a group. In one of the schools, to which I have regular access, I taught a set 4 of similar composition during part of the following year. It was a challenging experience. Rewards were few and the antagonism felt by the boys towards what some of them saw as the imposition of an unnecessary subject on their time-table was often expressed verbally and in a variety of other ways....)

A similar pattern crops up in set 5, this time, however, with girls outnumbering boys. Only a handful of these girls elected to go on with a language in the fourth year and teachers spoke of similar difficulties in motivating this sort of group. Certainly, fine setting seems to create as many problems as it is intended to solve: on the one hand, at the top ability level, an uneven set of opportunities, and, at the lower level, some difficult teaching experiences for staff.

c) Pupil Perceptions of Gender Differences

In much of the literature on sex differences in education, as has been shown, the general assumption is that boys will perform in language and languages less well than girls and, as a partial consequence, will come to associate language learning, in whatever guise, with notions of femininity. It is probably true that some boys, with an exaggeratedly narrow view of masculinity, will shun activities in which the male of the species has not traditionally

excelled in preference for other ways of operating where they can display conventional male stereotypes - practical, physical, aggressive forms of action.

An item in the pilot project had been included among reasons for opting out of languages viz. 'I shall not be taking a foreign language in the fourth year because I think languages are really girls' subjects.' In the second survey it was decided, in addition to this item, to include:

- * direct questions relating to pupils' experiences of and preferences for female and male staff
- * a section seeking reactions to the question of whether it makes any difference being a boy or a girl learning a foreign language.

Sex of Teacher

In the event, only 45% of pupils in the three schools had been taught by both female and male staff. 37.4% claimed to be indifferent to the sex of the teacher and boys and girls seemed to share this opinion. I decided to test these reactions further in later surveys, given the hypothesis that was beginning to emerge from teachers' comments, namely that the predominance of women teachers of languages serves to increase the feminine aura surrounding languages in schools and that pupils of both sexes would prefer to be taught by a teacher of the same sex.

Views on the opposite sex within the peer-group

Pupils were asked whether they thought boys or girls were better at languages. Results are given in Table 36.

TABLE 36: PUPIL PERCEPTIONS OF RELATIVE PERFORMANCE OF THE SEXES

IN FOREIGN LANGUAGES:

3 SCHOOLS - 1983

Several pupils objected to this question, e.g. 'I think I don't like the idea of asking if boys or girls are better'. This kind of remark can be interpreted as being indicative of a heightened sense of awareness of the dangers of sexism in society. It could also be just a sign that children do not like being forced into comparing themselves with others, especially if to do so may reveal inferiority on their part.

There is some indication that girls are perceived to be better, both by boys and the girls themselves. This would confirm earlier studies which lead one to believe that girls enjoy a better self-image as far as languages are concerned. However, the strength of the 'no difference' scores is quite substantial and noticeably uniform. Further work, therefore, on this kind of direct questioning was considered to be important to check whether this was merely a casual occurrence.

Pupils were also questioned about how important they thought it was

for either sex to learn languages. Table 37 sets out the results for this part of the questionnaire.

TABLE 37: PUPIL PERCEPTIONS OF RELATIVE IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGES

FOR BOYS AND GIRLS:

3 SCHOOLS - 1983

It is likely that same sex peer-group identity is an influential factor in these results. Boys especially seemed prone to defend their reputations at all costs and I am sure that several failed respond to the statements with due regard for reality. Indeed, I was in a position to overhear one lad saying to himself: 'Hm! Of course we're better than the girls at everything.' This is, indeed, one of the difficulties of research through questionnaires. They may evoke a hasty reaction which, while almost essential in some elements such as an attitude scale, may serve to veil a more genuine, more measured response in others. I suspect that, for some pupils, the desire to remain loyal to their own sex prevailed over their true feelings about the comparative performance of the opposite sex. But, clearly, the high percentages of pupils denying differences would suggest that it is far too simplistic to link the language drop-out problem among boys too closely with pupils' labelling of subjects, conscious or subconscious, as masculine or feminine. Later research involving much larger samples (A.P.U., 1985; 1986) provides additional similar evidence. (See also Chapter 9, Factor 3, ii)

d) Foreign Language Choices

a) Opting in

The third part of the questionnaire dealt with option choices. There was also a page for pupils to write down what they liked and/or disliked specifically about their language lessons. Points raised there have already furnished ideas in the discussions developed so far in the thesis, but I shall report on pupils' free responses separately in a later section of this chapter.

In the pilot project, seven reasons for continuing with a language had been offered and eight against. There had been space for pupils to add other reasons that they thought applied to them. In the event, several found their way on to the pages and some occurred frequently enough to warrant inclusion in the second survey. The results of this survey of reasons for opting for a language are given in Table 38.

TABLE 38: REASONS FOR OPTING FOR A FOREIGN LANGUAGE:

3 SCHOOLS - 1983

The figures should be studied bearing in mind the following general information.

There were 97 boys who opted to continue: i.e. 43% of the total number of boys; 32% of the total of pupils opting in; and 21% of the

total survey population, boys and girls. There were, on the other hand, 202 girls opting for a language: 85% of all girls; 68% of the pupils opting in; and 43% of survey population. The proportion of those continuing with a language to examination level was well above the average suggested by surveys of national trends (HMI, 1975 & 1985; DES, 1983). Given the relatively small numbers of pupils carrying on with German and Latin, responses specific to these languages, which did not differ substantially from those for the main language French, have been subsumed within the figures

The stimulus 'I might want to travel abroad and a language could be useful' attracted the greatest response from both boys and girls (81% for all pupils). However, containing as it does two rather vague, speculative statements, it could be felt to offer too uncontroversial a choice and this may have contributed to its receiving perhaps an exaggerated degree of attention. Nevertheless, as has already been reported, comments earlier in the questionnaire had suggested that a number of pupils were, in fact, contemplating a future involving travel abroad and work where languages might be a useful adjunct to other skills. Nearly a third of pupils (32%) had also obviously enjoyed, hitherto, contact with people abroad and this had apparently had some bearing on their decision to continue.

Of more immediate import, maybe, are other high-scoring items revolving around the pupils' current circumstances such as parental wishes (60%), liking for the teacher (43%) and liking for the way the subject was taught (54%). Aspirations for the future in terms of

hopes of examination success (65%) and ideas about work following (57%) are also critically important. It was in these areas that the most noticeable sex differences were to be found. There was strong evidence from these results that the girls in these schools:

- * saw more likelihood of their using a foreign language at work
- * were under greater parental persuasion (or pressure?) to continue with a language
- * placed a higher value on contact with people abroad, both in the present and in the future
- * saw more possibility of studying the language to Advanced level
- * were more susceptible to empathetic factors relating to teachers.

These results are, to a large extent, in line with larger surveys of option choices (Bardell, 1982; Pratt et al., 1984), both in terms of the reasons accorded high influential value on choices - e.g. previous or anticipated success, relevance to career, opinions about teachers; and with regard to those elements given low priority - e.g. the desire to stay with friends.

Other reasons for opting for a language

Pupils supplied a number of additional reasons for choosing to go on with a language. Some of these were, in reality, repetitions or reinforcements of items already provided. To give a flavour of the kind of comments made, I illustrate with one of these postscripts that could be said to disclose poignantly a young adolescent in the

throes of seeking self-identity and asserting self over parental pressure:

'In no. 10 it is nothing to do with my parents. Well it is a bit, but it is my life I have to continue with and I think its up to me what or what not I do in the future, though they did encourage me a bit.'

A selection of other comments in appropriate order of frequency by theme are presented verbatim below (b=boy; g=girl). Girls contributed many more ideas than boys.

i) Enjoyment and interest

'Language lessons make a pleasant change from the other lessons where you are always speaking English.' (g)

'I've enjoyed French from Primary school and I want to keep it up because I have always wanted to learn and to be able to speak a foreign language.' (g)

'You could want to do it out of sheare intrest or just take it up as a pastime.' (b)

'I find German a fascinating language.' (b)

'I enjoy translating French.' (b)

ii) Past success

'Because I think I've done quite well so far.' (g)

'Because I usually get good marks.' (b)

iii) Usefulness

'There is a great need to know languages nowadays.' (b)

'I think it will be useful to me even though it will be a hard slog to get my exams.' (g)

'I speak to French people everyday on CB and would very much like to speak to them in there own language.' (b)

iv) Perseverance

'I have spent 3 years on French and I don't want to feel I have just been wasting my time.' (g)

'I feel I would be defeated if I gave it up even though I don't like it very much.' (g)

v) Faute de mieux

'Because I couldn't really think of what else to do.' (b)

'Because it was the only thing in the column that I didn't really hate.' (b)

In reality, the reasons presented for choosing a language were, generally speaking, positive ones. There were only three items which could be interpreted as negative or constrained choices. These were:

- * I need another subject to fill my timetable and the language fits in better than anything else.
- * The option system makes it difficult for me to drop a language.
- * A language is compulsory in the fourth and fifth year.

The questionnaire used two years later in the 1985 survey was developed taking into account any omissions highlighted by the pupil comments above.

Curiously a handful of pupils were under the impression that a foreign language was compulsory. This was not strictly true in the three schools, although the way one school designed the option blocks made it difficult for some able pupils to drop a language. Hence, the fact that one in five pupils felt constrained by the option system. In the 1985 questionnaire the item referring to compulsion was, sensibly, dropped though specific reference to the option arrangements limiting the choice was retained.

Opting out

Since the numbers of pupils in the survey who had elected to continue studying a language were substantial (64%) the information gathered on those opting out was on a comparatively small scale. Only 166

pupils completed the final part of the questionnaire enquiring about reasons for opting out. Of these, 129 were boys (78%) and 37 were girls (22%). This represents a sex ratio of 1:3.5 boys to girls. Table 39 gives details of the returns for this part of the questionnaire.

TABLE 39: REASONS FOR OPTING OUT OF A FOREIGN LANGUAGE:

3 SCHOOLS - 1983

One must not be tempted to read too much into these results, given the small number of pupils involved. One of the most salient features appears to be that the idea that languages present more difficulty than other subjects is uppermost in the minds of both boys and girls. This tends to reaffirm teachers' own impressions, my own included, that the standards by which foreign language competence is judged have been exaggeratedly high for many years resulting in the creation of an artificial barrier to success, and hence motivation, for many pupils. Pupils also weigh up their chances in future examinations and a negative self-evaluation inevitably leads to withdrawal at the first opportunity.

There are sex differences apparent in relating languages to future jobs. This mirrors, in a negative sense, those opting in for job-related reasons. There are, however, no real divisions between the sexes in their views on teachers, nor lack of desire to have contact with foreigners.

The inclusion of a question relating to languages as girls' subjects attracted no response whatsoever. One might have anticipated that at least some of the 129 boys might have considered this as a possible influence on their decision-making - but not so, apparently. This result throws into question, yet again, the commonplace assumption that boys shy away from languages because of their fear of being branded as effeminate. Of course, it could be argued that boys really do think like that but refuse to acknowledge this argument and therefore signal their refusal by avoiding any reaction to the suggestion in the questionnaire. However, I am not convinced that the convoluted logic of this proposition applies, especially since nil returns were made by all the boys affected. A more plausible reason for this unanimity is, quite simply, that boys do not pin sex-stereotypical labels on foreign languages, at least not at this stage of their schooling.

In these three schools it was obvious that curriculum planners had thought long and hard about the construction of the option schemes that they would operate. Only a handful of pupils were, seemingly, disappointed not to be doing a language in the fourth year because they had been affected by time-table problems.

Other reasons for opting out of languages

A number of reasons over and above those offered on the questionnaire for opting out were mentioned by pupils. Some of these just served to

reinforce statements already provided, especially in connection with ideas about future jobs or degrees of importance. e.g. 'There were more important subjects in the boxes where French was.' One or two pupils in one school objected to the fact that they had been prevented from continuing with German unless they took French as well. This policy certainly seems a harsh one and not exactly designed to support the maintenance of provision of the second foreign language. These pupils, rather than be forced into continuing with French in order to be in a position to take the language they really wanted, German, had decided to abandon languages altogether - another regrettable outcome of a short-sighted policy.

There was also more and poignant evidence of pupils being all too aware of their own inadequacy. For instance:

'I just don't understand.' (g)

'I don't think I am good enough.' (g)

'I never understand and always copy my friends.' (b)

'I think I wouldn't be able to concentrate very well than I usually do.' (b)

There were also signs that lack of continuity in the teaching staff had contributed to ill-ease among pupils with the inevitable consequences. For example:

'Because during the second year I had three teachers. Their methods were different and I found it hard to concentrate on what they said.'

The second survey provided very useful insights into the work of the

foreign language departments in the three schools, the process of option taking and pupils' perceptions of foreign language study. I determined to pursue two further aspects in greater depth at the earliest opportunity in the next round of personal investigations. This was to concentrate attention on the organisation of teaching groups, especially with regard to setting. Findings on this topic have already been reported in Chapter 3 in the section relating to The first three years of foreign language learning and further details are supplied in Chapter 9, Factor 2, iv) Assessment. I was also motivated to consult teachers themselves on the sex imbalance in foreign languages. A discussion of their replies follows in Chapter 7, Part 1.

CHAPTER SEVEN

PERSONAL INVESTIGATIONS: 1983-1986

Part 1: Teacher Perceptions

Background

I reported in Chapter 3 how, during the summer term of 1983, I had investigated the numerical sex differences in the composition of foreign language classes following the organisational change from mixed ability classes to teaching groups setted according to ability. The results of that survey confirmed unequivocally my suspicions that the pattern of the sex imbalance found later after option choices and in public examinations entries had been and no doubt is still being established very early. By implementing procedures that are aimed at producing more homogeneous teaching groups, but which result, generally, in fewer boys than girls being placed in top ability sets, teachers create and perpetuate a trend that is, ultimately, damaging to both boys and girls because of the resultant feminine image that may emerge.

The final section of the questionnaire (see Appendix B) invited responses to a specific question. Plenty of space was provided for written answers and, judging from the willingness of teachers to

write extensive replies, there was considerable concern and interest in the issues raised by the question. The exact wording was:

'In many schools, once setting occurs, fewer boys than girls find their way into the top sets for foreign languages. Have you any opinions as to why this should be?'

The questionnaire was sent to fifty mixed schools in one local authority. Forty-two of these were able to furnish details of their setting policies and assessment procedures and five of the remainder also sent in replies to the last section. At the same time twelve other schools in a neighbouring authority were also invited, at the request of the local adviser for languages, to take part in a similar survey. Heads of departments were invited to copy the final page of the questionnaire and distribute it among their colleagues, or to discuss the question and send in a composite reply. During 1984 and 1985, copies of the same questionnaire were also distributed at a number of teachers' meetings and conferences across the country. In all, a total of 171 completed sets of replies were gathered - a substantial pool of teacher opinion and experience. It is recognised that the methods of gathering information described above are not systematic. The sample of teachers involved was random in that, apart from knowing the name and location of the school, I had no control over the persons contributing ideas, for example, in terms of their sex or length of experience. Nonetheless, the purposes of the exercise, that is, to explore teachers' sensitivity to the issue and their assumptions about sex differences in languages, were surely achieved.

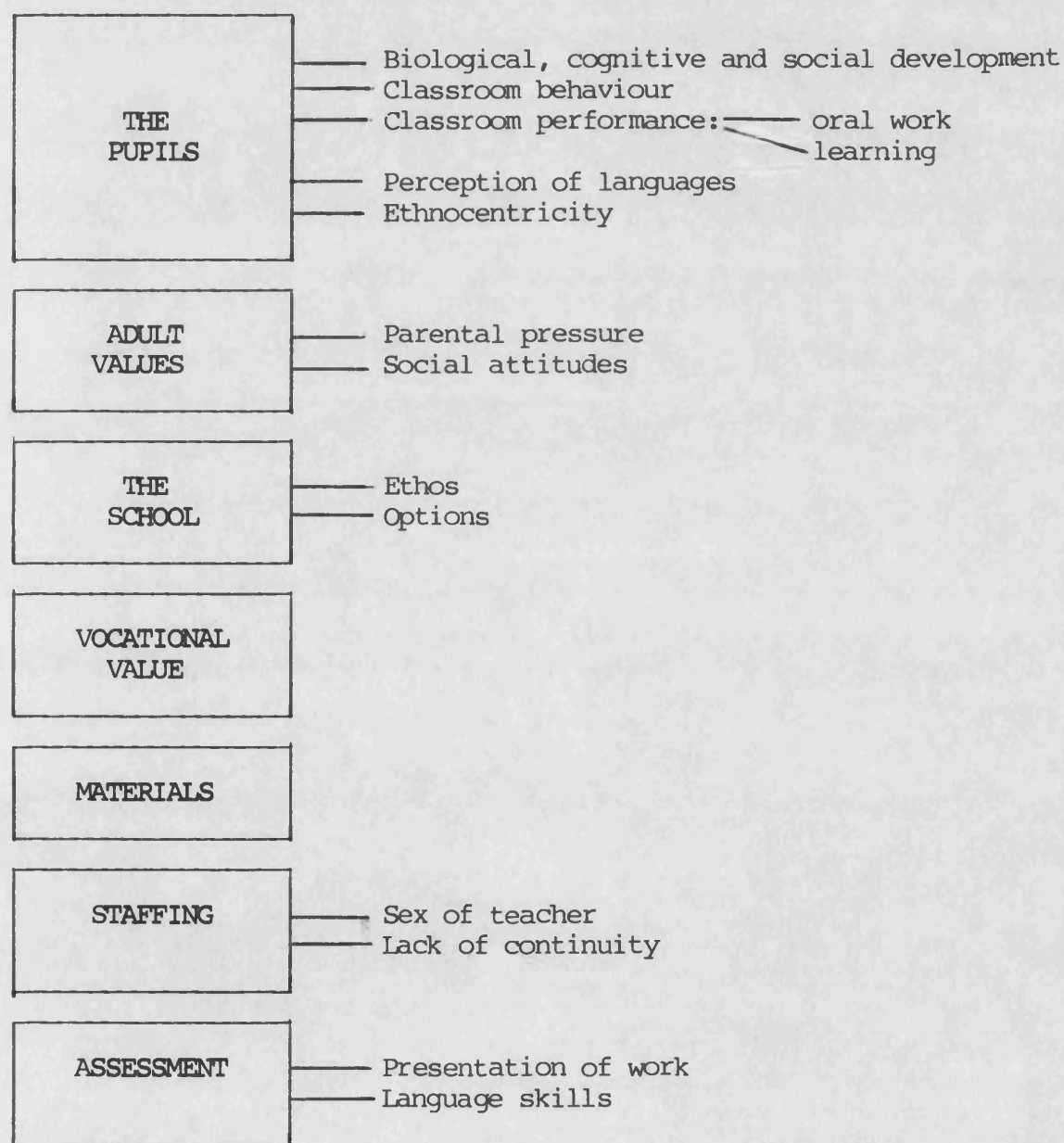
In analysing the replies I have endeavoured to group them under

several headings, although it is inevitable that some comments defy precise categorisation and some overlap is bound to be noticed in my treatment of the statements. Figure 11 gives an overview of the different groupings.

FIGURE 11: THE VIEWS OF PRACTISING TEACHERS

ON THE BOY-GIRL IMBALANCE IN FOREIGN LANGUAGES

CATEGORIES



There were several hundred comments springing out of this collection of written answers. The selection of illustrative examples, therefore, is bound to be subjective. The differing numbers of items under each heading is intended to give some idea of the proportion of responses within that category. But this is only the roughest of guides. Where the respondent's sex was identified, this has been included (f=female; m=male). Statements are presented with the briefest of comments from myself; they have, however, contributed enormously to my understanding of the complex issues involved and raised specific points which, in some cases, have already been discussed or, in others, will feature in my review of proposed remedies in Chapter 9.

THE PUPILS

Biological, Cognitive and Social Development

'Boys seem to develop later, not just in foreign languages. In other departments where setting occurs there is a similar pattern.' (m)

'Boys seem to be late developers and unless language courses run parallel in all sets the problems about moving up are insurmountable.' (f)

'Girls tend to be less inhibited and there are physical and mental factors on the part of boys, (voice-breaking, sensitivity and embarrassment).'

'Presumably the main reason is because at 11+ girls are generally ahead of boys in linguistic development.'

'In general, reading ages of girls tend, as shown by standardised tests, to be higher than those of boys. Some catching up by boys in middle school.' (m)

'The fact that girls tend to mature earlier and be more confident where oral work is concerned gives a false picture.' (f) (Not my underlining.)

Comment

If these teachers are typical of the profession in recognising girls' greater maturity at the time pupils begin foreign language learning, then it follows that these considerations should be taken into account when setting by ability occurs. Generally, they are not.

Classroom Behaviour

'Boys don't listen.'

'There is a tendency for boys to appear 'naughtier' in their first year thereby inclining teachers to assume they are less able than actually may be the case.' (f)

'The behaviour of boys often leaves a lot to be desired.' (f)

'Girls are more receptive in the early stages - usually listen better, repeat, speak more accurately and generally are less of a nuisance than boys.'

'Boys enjoy oral work in Year 1 but may lack maturity and application. By year 3 they are in the credit group.' (lowest ability)

'Boys appear to be more active, restless, need for physical movement - less interested in the more sedentary aspects of language learning.' (m)

Comment

Personal observations and research across the curriculum (Spender, 1983; Stanworth, 1983; Whyte, 1984) confirm that boys are demonstrably more lively, demand more teacher attention and cause more serious disruption to lessons than girls. Language teachers have generally been slower than their colleagues in other subjects to

offer pupils the chance of engaging in more active learning styles. Greater use of simulations and role-play, group-work etc., can improve the situation dramatically.

Classroom Performance

i) Oral work

'Girls are usually much more willing to participate orally than boys who are put off by being "made to speak" French or German.' (f)

'Boys in a mixed school often seem more self-conscious in oral work.'

'Possibly boys are discriminated against in the early stages because of their greater reluctance to verbalise in class, engage in what can really be meaningless conversations, act out, particularly in the option year.'

'I feel the stress on oral work, neatness, attention to detail doesn't always appeal to boys.'

'It is interesting to note that reports show that boys receive more attention and talk more than girls in mixed classes. If they are used to that they may feel disadvantaged in a foreign language class when the medium of communication (i.e. the foreign language) effectively restricts their ability to assert themselves.' (f)

'In language teaching, the medium of communication is often more important than the message. Boys tend not to appreciate this (perhaps they're right!) and they do not think of oral practice as work. Work, for them, is when you have written something in your exercise book, made an ashtray or performed an experiment in a laboratory.'

(m)

Comment

There are some extremely thought-provoking quotations here. The last two reinforce the notion that foreign language lessons are, in the most basic of ways, different from other lessons. Modern methods stress the desirability of using the foreign language as the medium

of instruction, but as Part 3 of this chapter will reveal, some pupils are liable to be alienated if this immersion in the "bain linguistique" proves to be a threatening, confusing or even meaningless experience.

ii) Language learning

'Language learning does, to some extent, depend on care, attention to detail and a sense of accuracy, things which girls tend to do better in the initial years. But more complex structure learning, pattern making, grammar learning comes after setting has been done. Boys may respond better to this than the work normally done in the early years.'

'Boys need longer to develop confidence in their reading and writing skills. We try not to herd them off from the girls but maintain their ego.' (f)

'Boys seem to lack the patience to read and write accurately until they reach approx 15 years old.'

'Girls are more prepared, on the whole, to put in the "grind" of verb and vocabulary learning.' (m)

'Boys are more turned on by problem-solving activities as in Maths and Science; less by pure learning.'

'Girls are assiduous in their efforts - enough to provide a more reliable recall than boys.'

'Boys prefer to be "very good" at a subject and if they judge themselves to be mediocre or bad at a subject they will soon give up.' (f)

'Boys do not seem to be conscientious enough to learn, thoroughly, the work in years 1 and 2 (e.g. vocabulary). Therefore low grades become a disincentive to continue language study.' (f)

'Experience shows that girls, in general, have the necessary perseverance, the mental application and determination to succeed in language study.' (f)

'Language written work often demands tidiness and correctness of spelling and attention to detail just at a time when boys are singularly untidy and pay less attention to detail.' (m)

'The highly traditional nature of much of the language teaching in England tends to favour the neater, more methodical, more painstaking efforts of girls.'

Comment

Undoubtedly, there were more responses in this category than in any other. Qualities such as conscientiousness, perseverance, determination, application, assiduousness, patience, precision, accuracy, reliability, attention etc., were used, virtually exclusively, to describe girls' learning styles - by both female and male staff. These attributes are not unique to the female of the species, of course, but the impression is that the young male pupil is largely bereft of the characteristics required to learn a foreign language. It has to be acknowledged that languages cannot, in the formal, or even informal setting of the school classroom merely be 'acquired'. Teachers can make efforts to provide conditions in which acquisition in the "Krashenian" sense of the term (Krashen, 1981 & 1985) can take place. But without active learning on the part of the student, either the process will be painfully slow or, with pupils demotivated by apparent lack of success, it will lead inexorably to complete failure.

Pupils' perceptions of languages

'Many first year boys seem to regard French as "poofy" according to my well-travelled, francophile son in his first year - likes France but has reservations about the language for this reason.' (m)

'Being good at French is perhaps identified with being a girl i.e. it becomes cissy, girlish to be good at French as far as boys are concerned.'

'Many boys regard language study as not valid/practical, hence not useful as compared with sciences.' (f)

'Most boys tend to find figures and diagrams more fascinating than words.'

'Boys seem to find a greater appeal in the sciences, practical subjects, new subjects (economics, computer studies). Many potential boy linguists have deserted languages for these subjects in spite of their parents' support for their child doing a language.' (m)

Comment

Teachers contributed comparatively few responses in which there was an assumption of direct sex-specific labelling by pupils. There was some evidence to suggest that designations of languages as "cissy" were more likely to be found in the city schools than in the rural environment.

Ethnocentricity

'Boys usually seem less keen on participating in exchanges.' (f)

'Girls are much more willing to go abroad for a lengthy stay as opposed to a short trip.' (m)

'Boys seem to have little desire to involve themselves with things foreign. They are self-sufficient in their world of sport, family and school - generally in that order! Perhaps girls are more sensitive to the needs of other cultures.'

Comment

Teachers were divided in their judgements about boys' views on foreign countries, people and their culture, but the majority agreed that it was difficult to get boys to write to penpals, send letters requesting local tourist information, collect realia etc. It would seem that girls were much happier about having direct personal links

with children in twinned schools or classes and sustained these once they had been established. During the pilot project, it was also discovered that more girls than boys had gone abroad on a school trip in the first three years.

ADULT VALUES

Parental attitudes

'In this working-class area, many parents are just too old to have experienced comprehensive education, in the main. So languages weren't in their curriculum and they don't attach much importance to them.' (f)

'In some catchment areas it is an extension of the parents' pressures and desires. Boys do chemistry, maths etc., while girls do two languages.'

'Boy pupils are much less well-motivated across the board; this is even reflected in attendance at parents' evenings (e.g. this year's 1st year parents' evening had at least one class where all the girls' parents turned up and none of the boys' parents did.' (m)

'Do parents allow girls to opt for subjects they like while boys have to "prepare for a career"?' (f)

Social attitudes

'Boys are under great pressure from home and society to put sciences first for career reasons. Everything points to science and technology. Very little is said nationally about a need for linguists.'

'General social sex-stereotyping pressures, not necessarily within school, as to what subjects are important - for boys especially.' (f)

'I'm far from convinced that the problem is rooted in languages as such, unless it's simply that they are the most difficult school subject and social attitudes cause boys to disdain the work ethic as a whole more than girls.' (m)

'Society does not expect boys to do well in languages. It's that simple. We all have low expectations of them as far as languages are concerned, so it's quite acceptable for them to fluff it and they know that.'

Comment

Even if social attitudes have changed relatively little, many language teachers have grown in awareness in recent years about society's sex-stereotyping of work and work-role expectations. Admittedly, the majority of those teachers who referred to sex-stereotyping specifically were women who undoubtedly had had most direct experience of the detrimental effects of the phenomenon on their own daughters' or their female pupils' lives. More generally, however, teachers of languages, female and male, are paying more attention to those who make public their disapproval of sexism in society because they recognise the effects on their own subject specialism. From the responses received it would appear that there is still need for a re-education programme of sexism awareness among parents and other school staff.

THE SCHOOL

Ethos

'I find that in our school the pressure to do science is very strong, on both boys and girls. Even pupils who are obviously much more able at English and arts and humanities subjects very often feel that they should be doing science.' (f)

'There is tremendous pressure in this school to concentrate on maths and physics and practical things.'

'Science options compete, computer studies, a new and popular subject, seem to be vital for careers. There is a distinct lack of push towards languages by the careers teacher.'

'Languages have become low status subjects in this school.' (m)

'We have lost many promising boy linguists this year. They have gone for sciences and practical subjects. This may not have always been what parents wished but what happens in school seems to count for more.' (f)

'Our school has a tradition for practical work and a bias in its philosophy towards vocational/scientific options for boys. This bias is reflected in the choice of staff advisers to parents at the time of third-year option choices.' (m)

Options

'When options occur we tend to lose some more able boys to computer studies and the sciences and time-tabling does not always make it possible for a combination of languages and sciences.'

'The option pools have had a disastrous effect this year.' (m)

'Languages still tend to get placed with science subjects or CDT in the option blocks with the inevitable dropping out of boys from languages.'

Comment

Language teachers have, without doubt, seen their subjects diminish in status over the past twenty years. It is not altogether a bad thing, of course, that, with the advent of comprehensive schools, languages were seen to be less a curriculum area reserved for the elite. However, the elite, that small percentage of the population who will achieve access to higher education and the high status professions that may follow graduate studies, no longer need the subject apparently. It is rarely demanded as a prerequisite for entry to undergraduate courses and there now appear to be more pressing demands on a student's time than to learn a foreign language. One consequence, therefore, of the reduction of its status to an optional extra in 14-16 education is that it has to compete with all other subjects. Many of these are considered within the school to be wiser choices, for boys especially. Exactly how this message is communicated to the school population is worthy of further research

in itself. Often the channelling of pupils into specific subject areas is the result of subtle hints over the course of the first three years. Sometimes, however, it is more obvious and appears to be related to the position of staff in the hierarchy of the school management structure (as the sixth comment under Ethos above reveals). It is essential, therefore, that languages staff take a more active part in promoting their subject at the crucial option stage. Suggestions as to how they may set about this task can be found in Chapter 9.

VOCATIONAL RELEVANCE

'Boys think early on in terms of a career and hence of the career value of the subjects they are studying. Boys do not always see the point of a language at this stage.' (f)

'Boys are traditionally directed towards vocational, practical subjects as opposed to other less definable things like languages.'

'The fact that English, maths and science (usually physics) are the subjects most frequently specified for job qualifications - and that a language is very rarely specified except as a university entrance requirement - and that rarely.' (m)

'In our area a high percentage of boys aim for jobs where a language qualification is unnecessary or unimportant.'

'Many boys regard languages as irrelevant to their future needs except as an extra exam subject, i.e. a necessary evil.'

'Girls consider it useful e.g. in conjunction with secretarial work.' (f)

'There is an apparent lack of career opportunities with foreign languages.' (m)

Comment

The final statement exposes the crux of the problem for languages

teachers. There is, indeed, a limit to the number of careers which demand a specialist knowledge of a foreign language. And yet it is true today, as it was when Burstall carried out her research, that pupils tend to view the enhancement of vocational success as the primary function of education and, in consequence, 'place a high value on school subjects which have an obvious relevance to their future employment prospects' (Burstall, 1974). In a world of work that is constantly changing in terms of occupational trends, language teachers and careers advisers may well find it difficult to promote languages as relevant per se, except in a small minority of cases. They should emphasise more than has been done in the past, the tremendous advantages that the knowledge of foreign languages can bring as ancillary skills in so many jobs and professions. Similarly, the business and industrial world needs constant reminding that orders are won in the world's competitive markets by those who make the effort to understand the culture, mentality and, of course, language of the buyer.

MATERIALS

'There is a lack of "discovery" and intrinsic interest in course materials.' (m)

'The actual language used in course materials often lacks robustness compared with real life usage.' (m)

Comment

Only a handful of teachers claimed that teaching materials might have a bearing on the subject and their responses were unspecific. Neither was it suggested that one or other sex might be affected to a greater

or lesser degree. Nobody referred to sex stereotyping in modern languages text-books.

STAFFING

Sex of teacher

'There are really too many women teachers in modern language departments.'

'Does the preponderance of women teachers in foreign language departments persuade some boys that it is a girls' subject?'

'Boys still see it as a female dominated subject, especially when you look at the number of female as against male staff in language departments.' (m)

'Do women teachers actually prefer girls? There's a lot more female solidarity around - support groups and so on. Is there some deep psychological thing that makes them pander to boys, while metaphorically winking at the girls that they are doing this on purpose?' (f)

Comment

A few more statements and a full discussion of this theme, which many teachers feel relevant and which obviously requires discussion, can be found in Chapter 9, Factor 2, i). The strain of language teaching and natural processes (e.g. time for child-birth) were also mentioned in connection with changes in staff. There were as many arguments presented in this category by men and women.

Lack of continuity

'In this 14-18 school a lot of pupils have had 2 or 3 teachers before

they come. There's a big staff turnover in the lower school and this puts the kids off the subject,' (f)

'A lot of young women teachers are only in the job for a very short time before starting families. I'm not against that! It's a fact of life. But it does cause time-tabling and cover problems. Last summer term I had 7 supply and temporary staff covering two timetables (maternity leave). We coped but I'm worried about the effects on the pupils' progress and overall impression of the subject.' (m)

Comment

Judging from pupils' unsolicited comments on this same theme and their anxieties about language teachers constantly 'chopping and changing', teachers are right to be concerned that the image of languages may be adversely affected by lack of continuity of staff. The reorganisation of mixed-ability classes into sets can also mean, of course, that pupils have to adjust to new teachers and new teaching styles early on in their foreign language education.

ASSESSMENT

I have preferred to subsume the listing of comments under this heading in my review of causes and remedies in Chapter 9, since I believe that the teachers' evaluation of pupil performance to be one of the most significant elements in the debate about sex differences and the drop-out problem. See Chapter 9, Factor 2, ii).

CONCLUSION

What was striking in this collection of teachers' opinions on the boy-girl imbalance in foreign languages at school level was the gravity with which the teachers had viewed the question originally posed. It gave rise to the expression of ideas on topics reaching far beyond the single issue of setting pupils after mixed-ability classes. True, there were one or two teachers who considered the question as unnecessary, if not irrelevant. One example of this kind of reaction is offered:

'This phenomenon has been known to me for nearly 50 years, all of which I have spent in mixed schools. As I have never experienced single-sex education the phenomenon seems entirely natural to me.'
(m)

Most teachers, however, seemed prepared to challenge the 'natural order' and to seek out some of the factors that perpetuate outmoded social and educational patterns of behaviour and organisation.

Some of the suggestions made by teachers conveyed such a sense of conviction that it was obvious that in the ideas proposed the relationship between cause and effect was well-established in the minds of the writers. Others were more circumspect or tentative and remained at a hypothetical level. There is a clear need for research in order to substantiate the reality of all the suggestions made. All serve to provide further proof of the complexity of this particular educational 'phenomenon'. Some of the more prominent generalisations made, especially in relation to developmental or

behavioural facets of the enquiry, could, of course, serve to heighten the risks of sex-stereotyping. Similarly, teachers' interpretations of pupils' decisions, motives and preferences, may not always be grounded in fact; and the damaging effects of low teacher expectations on pupil behaviour and academic attainment are well-known.

One teacher wrote a single line response representing, presumably, the considered view of his whole department:

'This has mystified us for years!'

It is hoped that the research that has led to the production of this thesis and the evidence accrued will serve, at least to some extent, to de-mystify the phenomenon in the minds of teachers such as these.

CHAPTER EIGHT

PERSONAL INVESTIGATIONS: 1983-1985

Part 2: Pupil Perceptions and Decisions at 14+

i) Background

In May 1985, seven mixed comprehensive schools participated in a survey aimed at seeking third-year pupils' view on a number of issues relating to foreign language learning. A total of 1095 pupils (536 boys; 559 girls) were involved, their average age being 14 years 4 months at the time of the administration of the questionnaire. This comprised several sections. The first elicited general information about the pupils and their subject preferences. The second asked specific questions about possible differences between the sexes. These two parts were much in line with previous surveys conducted on a smaller scale. The third was a section dealing with pupils' attitudes to learning languages, the results of which are reported in Batters (1987). The fourth part, divided like the third into specific languages, dealt with influences on option choices.

Six of the schools had previously been involved in a similar exercise two years earlier, without, however, the references to option decisions (Powell & Batters, 1985). Roughly the same cohort of children, therefore, were questioned for a second time, the original

purpose having been to draw out similarities and differences between selected pupils after two further years of foreign language learning. Comparisons between schools and the various patterns of provision for languages existing in them had also been an objective of the research. This had, however, proved not to be feasible, the degree of influence of a form of curricular and departmental organisation remaining an intangible, indefinable variable, defying objective evaluation.

Besides, in many large scale studies of school effectiveness 'within school' variance in attainment has been found to be much greater than 'between school' variance and factors such as facilities, resources and curriculum organisation have been found to account for relatively little variation in pupils' achievement. In the report of a major investigation into equality of educational opportunity in the United States, (Coleman et al., 1966), the following rather depressing conclusion was reached:

'Schools bring little influence to bear on a child's achievement that is independent of his background and general social context.' (p.325)

In more recent research into the sources of difference in school achievement in this country (Brimer et al., 1978), a similar word of caution is given to those seeking simple, categorical answers to this research dilemma and those looking for unequivocal solutions to the different problems facing schools:

'It would be unlikely that any single feature would be found to be uniquely responsible for any large part of between-school variance, since all the factors would be collusive and would share their contribution to variance.' (p. 202)

If it is so difficult to isolate the origins of the differing degrees of academic performance, it is manifestly unrealistic to extract attitudinal relationships that may derive from environmental or organisational arrangements.

It could be argued that the sample of schools chosen for the field work in this case, presenting as they did the range of organisational differences outlined below, reflects in microcosm many features of the national scene. Yet no claims for representativeness are being made; no tests of statistical significance are applied. (Only the Attitude Scale contained within the 1983 survey had been computer analysed using a range of statistical procedures). The 1985 survey must be considered to have involved a sample of convenience, the research having been conducted within severely restricted limits of time, space, finance and human resources.

All the schools were located within a fifty mile radius and displayed a range of similarities and differences relating to their evolution as comprehensive schools, their catchment areas, staffing, size and ethos. In the event, the pattern of results emerging from the schools was very similar across the population. A brief description of each is set out below.

School A

Group 12, 11-18 mixed comprehensive school on two sites.

Location: small town within commuter belt of large city.

Languages: 1st foreign language French. Option system designed to support strongly the continued study of a language. 2nd foreign language German offered to most able in year 3. Foreign language classes setted from the beginning of the second year.

Staffing: 4 female (1 part-time); 3 male.

Number of pupils involved in the research: 197; 101 girls, 96 boys.

School B

Group 10, inner-city purpose-built 11-18 mixed comprehensive, opened in 1977.

Languages: 1st foreign language French. Core curriculum subject 11-16. 2nd foreign language Spanish offered to most able year 3.

Languages in broad bands from the beginning of the second year.

Staffing: 4 female; 2 male.

Number of pupils involved in the research: 172; 96 girls, 76 boys.

School C

Group 9 inner-city 11-18 mixed comprehensive school. Previously an all girls school. Mixed since 1981.

Languages: 1st foreign language French taught to all pupils in year 1. 2nd foreign language German offered to most able year 3. Classes streamed from year 2.

Staffing: 2 female; 1 male.

Numbers of pupils involved in the research: 99; 59 girls, 49 boys.

School D

Group 12 rural 11-18 mixed comprehensive.

Languages: 1st foreign language: French and German equal status. Pupils' have free choice of language which is taught to all pupils years 1-3. 2nd foreign language French or German offered to most able year 2. Classes setted from the beginning of year 2. French taught in single sex groups year 2 for 1st foreign language pupils.

Staffing: 6 female (2 part-time); 3 male.

For the purposes of this research only pupils learning French as their 1st foreign language were monitored.

Number of pupils involved in the research: 101; 53 girls, 48 boys.

School E

Group 12 rural 11-18 mixed comprehensive.

Languages: 1st foreign language: French and German equal status. Taught to all pupils years 1-3, with annual intake divided equally between both languages. 2nd foreign language French or German offered to most able year 3. Foreign language classes finely setted from Christmas in the first year.

Staffing: 2 female; 4 male (1 part-time).

Number of pupils involved in the research: 153; 72 girls, 81 boys.

School F

Group 12 inner city 11-18 mixed comprehensive with fairly severe problems of falling rolls.

Languages: 1st foreign language German taught to all pupils years 1-3. 2nd foreign language French offered to most able year 2. Classes setted from the beginning of the second year.

Staffing: 4 female; 3 male.

Number of pupils involved in the research: 203; 101 girls, 102 boys.

School G

Group 12, 11-18 mixed comprehensive in a small country town.

Languages: 1st foreign language French taught to all pupils years 1-3. 2nd foreign language German offered to most able year 2. Classes setted at the end of the first year.

Staffing: 5 female (1 part-time); 3 male.

Number of pupils involved in the research: 170; 77 girls, 93 boys.

ii) Subject Preference

After questions gathering personal details which identified the pupils, they were asked to give some indication of the subjects they liked and disliked. The format of the questionnaire for this part was identical to that reported in Chapter 6, Part 2 (i). Pupils completed this section ignorant of what was to follow.

The extent to which both French and German are comparatively unpopular subjects soon became apparent, with 17% of pupils considering French as least favourite subject and 9% German. Taking the sum of negative tallies for French placed that subject second only to mathematics as least popular. Maths attracted 419 negative tallies (38.3%); French - 386 (35.2%). In the second survey discussed in Chapter 6 the figure was 37%. Full details of the results are given in Tables 40 and 41. Separate figures are provided for French and German but it should be borne in mind that not all of the pupils had studied German, about 15% having been denied access to

the second language. This was also true for a number of pupils in schools E & F who, having begun their language course with German, were not able enough to be considered for a second language course in French. Also, in school B, Spanish, not German was the second language offered.

TABLE 40: POPULARITY OF FRENCH:

7 SCHOOLS - 1985

TABLE 41: POPULARITY OF GERMAN:

6 SCHOOLS - 1985

As expected, many more girls than boys expressed a liking for French and German, virtually twice as many in each case. Those who actually classified a language as favourite subject were, however, in a very small minority, (2.6%). In six of the schools at the beginning of the second year the figure had been 3.2%. Placing French in context with other curriculum areas shows how relatively poorly the subject fares. French is on a par with Physics - another subject which regularly fails to attract popular support. Opinions between the sexes here are polarised with girls rating French favourite in a similar proportion to boys liking physics. Table 42 gives the overall picture of subject appeal across the curriculum for pupils in these seven schools.

TABLE 43: FAVOURITE SUBJECT AMONG THIRD-YEAR PUPILS:

RANK ORDER:

7 SCHOOLS - 1985

It is perhaps inevitable that pupils are more favorably disposed to those activities in school which offer them some relief from classroom routines. Craft, games and home economics offer a practical dimension to the school day. It must be said however that the sex-stereotyping of the the first and last of this group is reflected in the 'voting', with massive male support for craft and female for home economics. English and the humanities also tend to allow more scope for individual endeavour and in many of these syllabuses in the first three years of the secondary school the pupils' own experiences are central to lesson content. These five named subjects stand some way above the remainder in degree of popularity as measured by favourite subject status.

The unpopularity of French and German among this population is analysed below. The data is given in Tables 43 and 44.

TABLE 43: UNPOPULARITY OF FRENCH:

7 SCHOOLS - 1985

More boys show antipathy for French than girls overall and by ranking it the least favourite lesson of their school life. Girls, on the other hand - and this is a slightly unexpected finding - nearly match them in coolness for the language when the total number of negative tallies is calculated. So often it is assumed that the positive attitudes displayed by girls towards foreign languages are uniformly displayed across the female population. These results would

suggest that this assumption is a gross simplification. It is true that comparative studies generally reveal significant sex differences in attitudes to languages, but it seems probable that the differences are largely accounted for by a sub-group within the female population under scrutiny, namely those girls - not necessarily the majority - who are succeeding in the subject and whose self-image is enhanced by the experience of language learning.

TABLE 44: UNPOPULARITY OF GERMAN:

7 SCHOOLS - 1985

Similarly, most noticeable in these results is not the dissimilarity of boys' and girls' opinions but the relative consistency of the unpopularity scores across the sexes. Marginally more girls than boys rank German as least favourite subject. This apart, boys show more disaffection generally but the differences are very slight. As Table 42 revealed, introducing German as first foreign language, as had been done to a greater or lesser degree in three of the schools, did not appear in this survey to have cast the language in a very favourable light - quite the reverse. Both languages end up in a high position in a table listing the rank order of unpopularity of subjects being studied in the third years of these seven schools. Table 45 refers.

TABLE 45: LEAST FAVOURITE SUBJECT AMONG THIRD-YEAR PUPILS:

RANK ORDER:

7 SCHOOLS - 1985

The tables giving rank orders for most and least popular subjects for all pupils conceal, as has been suggested above, some stark sex differences between the preferences of boys and girls. For example, in Table 42 the top two subjects, craft and games, are so placed largely by virtue of boys' scores (23.5% and 28.5% respectively). Only 7% of the boys, however, rated English above all other subjects. The polarisation of opinion relating to boys' and girls' preference for science and practical subjects on the one hand, and arts and languages on the other, is extended across the curriculum with the humanities subjects, blocked together here for convenience, placed at the neutral point. Little seems to have changed since the time Ormerod composed his gender spectrum in the mid-seventies (Ormerod, 1975). It is interesting to note that the popularity of humanities subjects for a section of female and male pupils is cancelled out, as it were, by its unpopularity, with 12.3% of girls and 16.6% of boys placing it least favourite subject.

Ideas about languages would appear to be strongly influenced by general sex-stereotyping of the curriculum except that a similar number - and a disturbingly high proportion - of boys and girls are prompt to register degrees of dissatisfaction with the subjects.

As will be seen from the the copy of the questionnaire used in the 1985 survey (Appendix C), the second section focussed on questions relating to:

- a) the sex of the language teacher
- b) the comparative importance of languages for the sexes
- c) the comparative performance of the sexes in languages

The results and ensuing discussion of these themes are included in Chapter 9, the first of them appearing under Factor 2 i) Sex of teacher, the other two items dealt with in the section Factor 3 The Pupils Themselves i) Understanding learners' experiences.

The remainder of this chapter is devoted to the presentation and discussion of the results of a survey of option choices which was the central purpose of the third section of this same questionnaire.

iii) Option Choices

In one of the seven schools involved in the 1985 survey, French formed part of the core curriculum for all pupils 11-16. The attitudes of these pupils to their being obliged to continue with a foreign language are discussed on Batters (1987). The pattern of uptake in the six other schools is given in Table 46.

TABLE 46: OPTION CHOICES IN 6 COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOLS:

1985

The take-up rate in these schools is undoubtedly better than the national average suggested by the DES (1983). With a little over half the school population deciding to continue studying a foreign language, these schools represent a model to which many other schools aspire. Of course, one cannot rule out the possibility that this was a particular 'good' year. It does happen, as teachers recognise, that a particular intake manages somehow to impress itself on the mind. Once a good reputation is established, albeit unwittingly by a group of pupils, teachers, by their actions, can encourage and sustain that image to the benefit of all parties. The converse is equally possible, naturally.

In school D such a situation had occurred, to some extent, though not all teachers agreed. The third year under scrutiny was deemed to be above average in its general performance as measured, unscientifically, by reference to the memory of preceeding years. It is distinctly possible that this was due, at least in part, to the fact that there were two language groups working under rather unusual conditions, i.e. in single sex sets. Being, thus, the focus of research may have produced some form of 'halo effect' in that their work was beneficially effected by their involvement and their awareness of the different arrangements. The extent to which this really did produce unexpected results, however, is arguable. That

particular school has an excellent tradition of attracting an above average number of pupils on to its courses in years 4 and 5.

One way, however, in which the figures in Table 46 do resemble those of the DES is the pronounced difference between the take-up rates of boys and girls. The ratio of boys to girls at 1:1.45 is only slightly better than that derived in Chapter 3. And this despite curricular initiatives - such as offering the two languages on a similar first foreign language status or having German as the first foreign language - developed with one of the aims being to attract more boys. These schemes have had limited success. They might just have helped to boost the take-up rate in the schools where they operated but they appear to have done very little to narrow the gap between the sexes.

Note: Within the population there was a small percentage of boys and girls (5.4%) who had elected to continue studying both French and German. Their double entry responses have not been isolated for special treatment. Usually, their responses differed from language to language. It should be recognised, however, that the inclusion of their results does swell the numbers involved marginally.

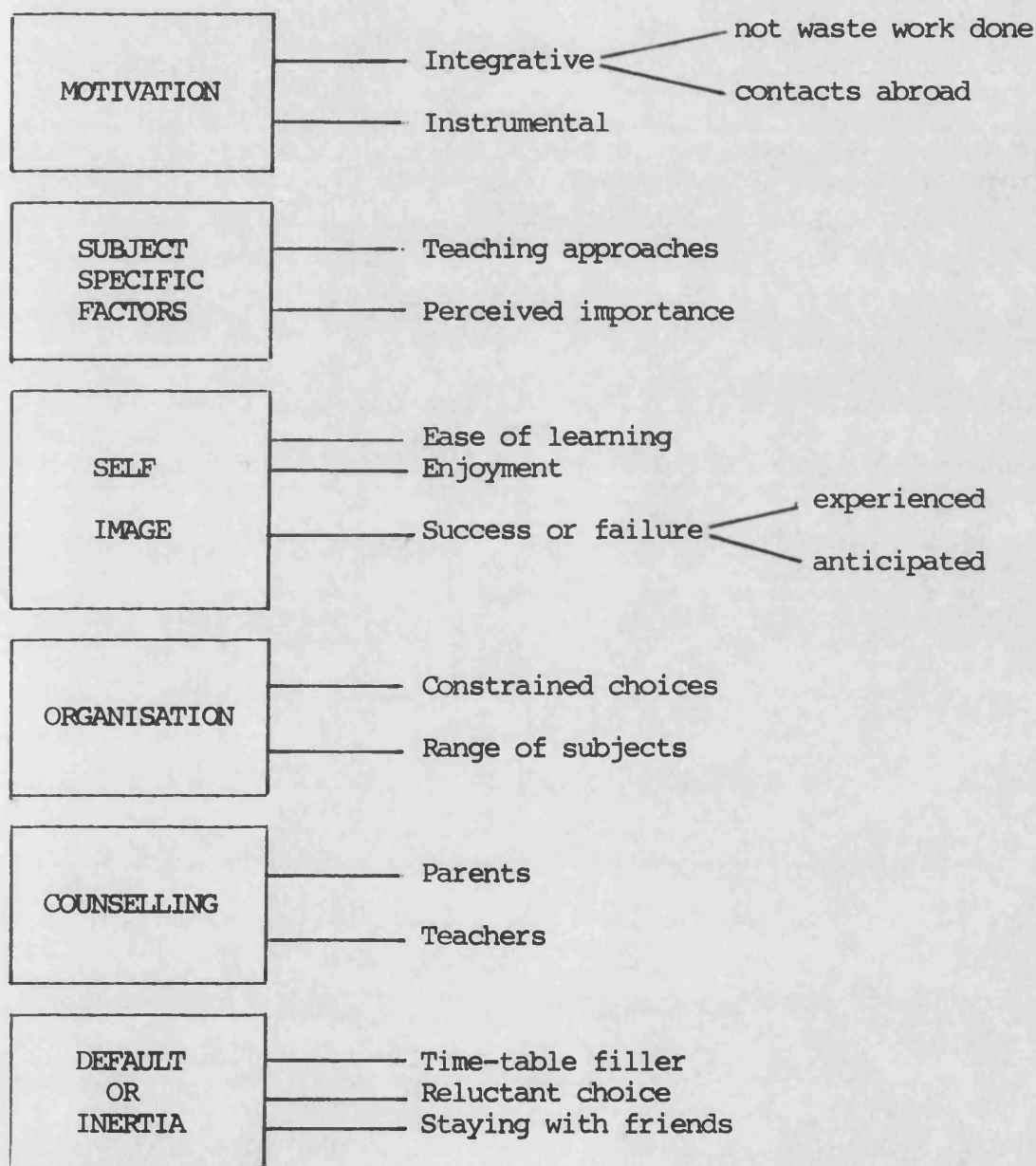
The Questionnaire

In designing the pages of the questionnaire eliciting responses about option choices, account was taken of the following:

- a) previous pilot surveys which, themselves, had been influenced by examples of questionnaires found in the literature,

b) discussions with teachers,
 c) pupil comments in free response sections during earlier surveys,
 d) informal discussion with third-year pupils during the previous year at the time of their option decisions.
 The general framework in which the final selection of items took place is illustrated in Figure 12.

FIGURE 12: FACTORS INFLUENCING OPTION CHOICE DECISIONS



The two surveys of option choices reported earlier (in Chapter 6, Part 2), had offered 7 and 15 items respectively for choosing a

language and 8 and 13 for deciding not to opt for a language. In 1985, it was decided to take account of pupil comments and to balance the positive statements by the inclusion of additional 'negative' or 'inertia' reasons, e.g. 'because I couldn't really think what else to choose.' An item referring to liking the teacher 'who might be teaching me next year', having caused doubts in pupils' minds earlier, was dropped, as was the item referring to possible study at A level. Responses to this item, had they been brought into realisation, would have created sixth-forms with overcrowded foreign language classes - obviously an unrealistic expectation! These and other slight changes were introduced in an attempt to make pupils concentrate on their immediate reality rather than the hypothetical future. Thus, statements referring to the possible study of a language 'later on in life' or travel abroad as an adult, were also excluded in preference for items about 'not wasting work already done' or about the desirability of 'a range of different subjects subjects to leave my choice of career open.'

On the scale setting out reasons for opting out, the principle changes mirrored those described above e.g. the inclusion of 'three years of learning French is enough for me.' Other changes were intended to provide a more economical wording of statements. It was also decided, after much thought, to eliminate the question about French/German as a girls' subject. This had elicited no response earlier and it was felt that sufficient evidence of pupils' gender-typing of languages - or lack of it - would have been manifested elsewhere on the questionnaire. In its stead, a non

gender-specific statement referring to preference for practical subjects was offered.

It is recognised that the researcher is faced with a dilemma when constructing a set of cues eliciting pupil response. The desire to include all potential reasons for a decision - in the case of option choices this could occupy several pages - must be restrained in order to offer pupils a manageable task. In the event it was considered that a reasonable balance between positive and negative was struck. The scale of items was extended on both reasons for and against, but each section was still contained within one page.

In addition, the strength of pupils' replies was measured by the introduction of six columns of differing values ranging from very strong agreement to very strong disagreement, as follows:

YES! Yes yes? no? no NO!

How to use these labels was clearly explained to the pupils by the researcher before they proceeded to the relevant pages and it is believed that pupils of all abilities fulfilled the task sensibly. Certainly, during the piloting of these questionnaires in one small local comprehensive school among twenty pupils of differing abilities in the third year, there were no problems apparent. It is felt, therefore, that the scales devised provided a reasonably reliable tool for examining the influences on decisions about subject choices.

I propose first to present and discuss the data for the combined results for the two languages, then to proceed to highlight the features applicable to each particular language and the sometimes contrasting picture that emerges from the pupils' responses.

Method of Analysis

For each factor on the two pages containing options for and against a foreign language, pupils were asked to circle one of six possible replies graded from the highly positive 'YES!' to the very negative 'NO!' These were assigned a numerical value 6 - 1 respectively. The total response score for each factor was calculated following a procedure used, inter alia, by Bardell (1982). The total response score for each factor was calculated. The sum of these scores divided by the total number of responses for that statement provided the critical value offering an overall measure of pupils' reactions. Pupils used the full range of values offered. There were very few nil responses registered.

Example: The total response score for 'because I've had good grades in French/German so far' is:-

$$(29 \times 1) + (44 \times 2) + (49 \times 3) + (122 \times 4) + (193 \times 5) + (73 \times 6) = 2155$$

2155 divided by the total no. of responses for this item: 515
gives a critical value of 4.18

A copy of the questionnaire used for this survey can be found in Appendix C.

a) Opting for a Foreign Language

Results

Table 47 gives the rank order for pupils' reasons for opting for a foreign language. The rank order for this and later tables is based on the critical values (the mean). The total of positive tallies, i.e. markings under the headings 'yes?' 'yes' and 'YES!', is also included in the tables to give a further idea of the strength of pupils' reactions. These scores do not necessarily follow the established rank order since, in some cases, the number of negative tallies would have increased the mean value.

TABLE 47: REASONS FOR OPTING FOR A FOREIGN LANGUAGE:

RANK ORDER:

1985

The results offer, I believe, a fairly representative picture of the factors affecting pupils' choices at the option stage. The most salient features of these results would appear to be as follows:

a) The most pressing reason for continuing with a language has little intrinsically to do with the foreign language itself. It tends to be a purely instrumental choice in the sense that in order, literally, to keep their options open, pupils see value in including a language alongside other subjects. Judging from the option booklets produced by schools to advise pupils and parents during the period leading up

to the decisions themselves, notice is being taken of the wise counselling of teachers.

b) On the other hand, a cluster of factors reflecting pupils' enjoyment, success or anticipated success in a language, m) 'enjoy learning f.l.', b) 'good chance of passing exams', i) 'good grades so far', c) 'f.l. easy', do rank high, as do reasons connected with work after schooling is completed.

c) The energy devoted by the language departments to establishing and maintaining contacts abroad by class links, visits and exchanges, seems to have been expended to some benefit given the relatively high incidence of tallies for reason o) 'enjoy contacts abroad'.

d) Pupils in the main appear to opt in for constructive, positive reasons rather than reasons associated with neutrality, reluctance or indecision.

e) Schools have obviously organised their option procedures with care, there being only a small minority of pupils (approx 6%) who are potentially reluctant learners in years 4 and 5, at least in so far as they have been 'forced' into continuing with a language rather than other preferred subjects.

f) Similarly, there was only a handful of pupils who considered that wishing to stay with friends (item h) was a valid reason for their choice.

Sex Differences

Naturally, of prime interest in this research are findings which indicate differences in the influences on boys and girls at this critical decision making time. Table 48 provides evidence of such differences in reasons for opting for a foreign language. The figures represent the critical value gap between the sexes, expressed positively. It was felt that this was a more striking way of indicating the divergence in the results than by constant referral to the mean value for the 'all pupil' score.

TABLE 48: SEX DIFFERENCES IN REASONS FOR TAKING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE:
CRITICAL VALUE DIFFERENCE

As can be seen by consulting this table, the differences are minimal save for a few scores marked by an asterisk which, at least in one case (item o), confirm earlier results in attitudinal factors. Obviously, girls' scores in g) 'useful in job', m) 'enjoy learning f.l.' and o) 'enjoy contact with people abroad', have contributed greatly to the high ranking of these items overall. Most noticeable is the girls' perception that a language will be useful in the sorts of job they expect to do on leaving school. Boys' considerations are more academic at this stage, the need for a full battery of examination subjects (item a) and their hopes of success in those eventual examinations (item b) being uppermost in their minds.

N.B. In most, but not all of the analyses by sex of the critical value scores relating to opting in and opting out of a foreign language, it was found that boys' scores were higher than those of the girls. It is a reasonable speculation that this was due, at least in part, to the way that boys and girls responded to the task itself. Certainly we should not rule out this element, or, rather, we should bear the possibility in mind when reading the data. A detailed study of individual results would indicate that boys were, for example, more prone to use the whole range of the six-point scale while girls were less likely to commit themselves to circling the extremes of 'YES!' and 'NO!'. This occurred especially when boys identified their reasons for opting out of a language. In view of this, therefore, minor differences in the critical mean scores should not be given undue emphasis. However, although no tests for statistical significance were applied, the most marked differences between the sexes, indicated by an asterisk on the tables, are surely worthy of our fullest attention.

b) Opting out of a Foreign Language.

Results

Table 49 sets out the rank order of pupils' reasons for deciding not to continue with a foreign language in the fourth and fifth year.

TABLE 49: REASONS FOR OPTING OUT OF A FOREIGN LANGUAGE:

RANK ORDER:

1985

When studying this and the following tables, two points should be remembered.

1) n = the number of returns for these pages of the questionnaire. This is in excess of the actual pupil numbers involved in the research since quite a proportion of the population, having been exposed to both French and German during their first three years of secondary schooling, decided to drop both languages. Naturally, I was keen to see whether there were different reasons in evidence for different languages but for the purposes of evaluating the overall context, the results were combined at this stage. The two languages are given separate treatment later in this chapter.

2) Schools had been selected for this survey partly because of their curricular arrangements in the hope that interesting data could be collected on both French and German. However, the status of the first and second languages becomes blurred when the results are massed together. Also, most schools in Britain still allow only an elite group of able pupils who are assumed to be capable linguists to experience German as a foreign language. These schools were untypical in offering access to that language to pupils of all abilities. In this sense, the results furnish us with a new perspective on that language as an option.

In some respects, these results represent the mirror image of the reasons for opting into language classes. Pupils are not influenced by friends' intentions (item h), nor does it appear that many were excluded or dissuaded from continuing with a language had they wanted to f) 'not given chance'; n) 'advised not to'; a) 'time-table problems'. The picture that emerges is of pupils disenchanted with language learning o) '3 years is enough'; finding the going hard and prospects of success bleak c) 'f.l. more difficult'; b) 'not pass exams'; i) 'not done well in past'. Reasons to do with the teacher or teaching are not substantially influential k) 'not like teaching'; d) 'not like teacher'.

Considerations of future work and the lack of apparent relevance or importance of a foreign language are of some significance g) 'not useful in job'; l) 'f.l.s not important'. Many pupils also appear to prefer practical components of the curriculum j) 'prefer practical subjects'; and it is quite common to find these set against a foreign language, especially a foreign language, in the option blocks.

Sex Differences

TABLE 50: SEX DIFFERENCES IN REASONS FOR OPTING OUT OF
A FOREIGN LANGUAGE:
CRITICAL VALUE DIFFERENCE

Extending the discussion above to sex differences in the results, we see quite clearly in Table 50 how there are minor dissimilarities affecting girls more than boys in the areas of time-table constraints (item a) and perceived risks of examination failure (item b) - fear of success would be too precise a definition here. Apart from these two areas, boys have registered their reactions more strongly on all other items bar one where the critical values were identical (item n - 'advised not to'). The most striking difference, as might be anticipated, occurs in j) where boys' predilection for practical subjects is conspicuous. Boys also rate languages as less important 1) 'f.l.s not important'; and less likely to be useful in their job expectations g).

Opting for French

Results

Table 51 gives the rank order of reasons for French on its own for boys and girls together.

TABLE 51: REASONS FOR OPTING FOR FRENCH:

RANK ORDER:

1985

The only difference between this order and the combined results for

both French and German is the switching of positions 15 and 16 for two of the 'negative' stimuli: 1) 'couldn't think what else to do' and f) 'couldn't do the subjects I really wanted'. Otherwise, the pattern is identical, with only slight differences in the strength of the feelings displayed by the pupils as measures by the critical value scores.

Sex Differences

Table 52, documenting the degrees of divergence between the boys' and the girls' views on reasons for opting for French, should be read in conjunction with Tables 48 and 54.

TABLE 52: SEX DIFFERENCES IN REASONS FOR OPTING FOR FRENCH:

CRITICAL VALUE DIFFERENCE

The high ranking of the reason o) 'enjoy contact with people abroad' in Table 51 is, to a large extent, the consequence of girls' desire to communicate and empathise with speakers of other languages. This is apparent in the results for French and German separately and is inevitably reflected in the combined results. Girls also tend to relate French more closely to their future work g) presumably expecting to realise stereotypical ambitions as bilingual secretaries or the like. They also display more positive liking for French per se m) 'enjoy learning French' and their teachers d) 'like teacher'. The boys register equally strong feelings but in a negative sense for the

fact that they need another subject to fill the time-table (item a). Otherwise boys' higher scores are of doubtful significance, given the potential sex bias in completing the questionnaire mentioned above.

It is in this table alone that girls record higher critical value scores in more items than boys, thus suggesting, once again, that there exists a greater affinity for French among girls than among boys.

d) Opting for German

Results

Table 53 reveals the rank order of reasons for opting for German.

TABLE 53: REASONS FOR OPTING FOR GERMAN

RANK ORDER:

1985

There are minor differences between these results and those observed at the lower end of the corresponding list for French, with three of the 'negative' or 'default' reasons shuffling into different positions. But these movements are of little account when so small a percentage separates the critical value scores. What attracts our attention more is the view that German is comparatively less useful

in the sorts of jobs pupils envisage for themselves. Item g) 'useful in job' has moved from 4th position for French, a reasonably secure 'YES!' rating, to 7th place for German where it has definitely attracted less support. Even here though, the difference in critical value scores is only 0.08%. It is interesting to note, nonetheless, that pupils do seem to consider that the vocational relevance of German is inferior to that of French. The message that West Germany is now our major trading export market seems to have failed to get across to parents and children.

Reasons to do with contacts abroad, on the other hand, now have an increased impact on the minds of children deciding to continue with German. Item o) has moved up the scale only two places but the difference in critical value scores is 0.23%. This rise is, interestingly, the result of an increase in both female and male pupils' responses on the affirmative side. It is known that the schools where German had been attributed equal first foreign language status, Schools D and E, and where German was offered as a first foreign language on its own, School F, had all developed successful links with schools in Germany. They also participated regularly in the annual exchange organised through a county twinning arrangement with localities in Germany. It is suggested, but it cannot be proved, that these efforts by teachers to ensure that pupils experience direct communication with the speakers of the target language have had some influence on pupils' willingness to contemplate further foreign language study.

Somewhat surprisingly, there appears to be little difference in pupils' perception of French and German in terms of ease of learning. The pattern of pupils wishing to retain a broad range of subjects is confirmed in these results for German. This rates as the most powerful factor once again and the distance separating this from other items at 0.19% for French and 0.14% for German is also not to be overlooked. With approximately four out of every five pupils continuing with a language stating that they are doing so in order to avoid restricting their career opportunities, a moderately good case could be made out for introducing a foreign language into the core curriculum.

Sex Differences

TABLE 54: SEX DIFFERENCES IN REASONS FOR OPTING FOR GERMAN:

CRITICAL VALUE DIFFERENCE

Girls' interest in contacts with people abroad (item o) dominates Table 54. Despite the rise in the scores for both sexes remarked upon above, the gap between the sexes is more pronounced for German than French: 0.68% as opposed to 0.57%. German is seen much more by boys as a subject to take for examination purposes. The distance between boys' and girls' scores here (0.46%) being considerably greater than it was for French (0.13%). This is no doubt linked to the following result where boys seem to reveal an idea that they consider German relatively easy. This is just one part of that conventional theory, which seems to be borne out by these results, that boys have

a greater affinity for German. It is here that the greatest gap between the sexes is to be found where boys are in the ascendancy (0.55%). Another facet of this feeling of ease is reflected in boys' stronger reaction to the statement about liking the teacher. Unlike in French where the gap was 0.42% in favour of the girls; in German the reverse applies with a 0.37% gap. Boys do seem to be influenced by a more positive appraisal of their own performance as far as German is concerned.

e) Opting out of French

Results

The rank order of reasons for opting out of French are set out in Table 55.

TABLE 55: REASONS FOR OPTING OUT OF FRENCH:

RANK ORDER:

1985

The most compelling reasons for abandoning foreign language study, whether that language be French or German, centre around feelings of inadequacy on the part of the learner. Tables 49, 55 and 57 all show how upwards of 65% of the pupils who were opting out recognised that they had reached what they considered to be their threshold. Items o) '3 years is enough for me', c) 'French is more difficult', b) 'not

pass exams' and i) 'not done well in the past', all receive massive support. The attraction of more practical subjects also is sufficient incentive for a sizeable majority.

The influence of parents, while moderately important for those opting in, has much less significance on those opting out. Few pupils, appear to have been advised by parents (item e) or teachers (item n) not to go on with a language.

Two girls and nine boys were so anxious to remain with their friends that they gave reason h) the highest possible score. Eleven other pupils indicated that wishing to stay with friends had some bearing on their desire to leave foreign language classes for good. But these are remarkably few pupils (5%). So often it seems that teachers, and possibly parents, underestimate the degree to which pupils make wise decisions, based, that is, on the available evidence. In the main, in my conversations with third-formers at this very important phase in their education I was struck by the way that they were able to sum up the situation and take decisions based on educational rather than sentimental grounds.

Sex Differences

Apart from a minuscule variation in boy' and girls' scores on item b) 'not pass exams', boys' results in Table 56 are higher across the board.

TABLE 56: SEX DIFFERENCES IN REASONS FOR OPTING OUT OF FRENCH:

CRITICAL VALUE DIFFERENCE

Most striking here is the opinion held, much more by boys than by girls, that French is just 'not very important to learn' (item l). The effect of this impression on boys' decisions is all too obvious. This, coupled with the notion that French is not useful in future jobs, would be already a formidable disincentive to continue with a language; but, in addition, practical subjects loom large in boys' thinking and, no doubt, their self-image receives stronger, more positive reinforcement in those areas of the curriculum as long as present social attitudes continue to distinguish between boys' and girls' supposedly differing orientations.

Just as liking of the German teacher was a contributory factor in boys' opting into that language, so dislike for the French teacher seems to have a bearing on boys' decisions to opt out of French. There were more male than female German teachers and more female than male French teachers in the survey schools, but it would be unwise to draw any direct links between these circumstances. It could be that this item attracted less a reaction about the personality of the teachers concerned than about the whole approach of the teacher within the total experience of learning the language. Item k) 'not like teaching', which also caused some difference of opinion between the sexes (0.26%) would add weight to this hypothesis. When, indeed, pupils say that they 'hate' their teachers, it generally tends to mean that they dislike what those teachers do and what they make

their pupils do during the lessons.

Finally, boys attribute more importance to the fact that parents seem less disposed to their continuing with French (item e) 0.4%). It would be interesting to explore this assertion further to ascertain whether it is, indeed, a verifiable justification for boys' discontinuing with the language; whether parents are actually telling their sons that they need not take French. Comparing results for the equivalent statement in the German section of the questionnaire we find much less evidence of there being a sex difference (0.11%). Yet another indication of the gender-typing of the languages?

Opting out of German

Results

The rank order of reasons for opting out of German are presented in Table 57.

TABLE 57: REASONS FOR OPTING OUT OF GERMAN:

RANK ORDER:

1985

Adequate discussion of the overall pattern of results has already taken place. Very little distinguishes this table from those for

French and the combined results for the two languages. This is to be expected. Scores for the various items are remarkably similar, both in the total number of tallies and their mean critical value. Pupils opt out of the two languages for identical reasons. In the simplest of terms, over 60% of these pupils are saying that three years are long enough for them.

Sex Differences

TABLE 58: SEX DIFFERENCES IN REASONS FOR OPTING OUT OF GERMAN:

CRITICAL VALUE DIFFERENCE

It appears from these results that girls have more difficulties with time-table constraints than boys, though why exactly this should be is not clear unless, that is, it is a result of schools tending to place the traditionally female orientated subjects such as domestic science and typing in the same option blocks as the second language. An investigation of the option arrangements designed by the schools for that year-group confirmed the suspicion that German appeared in a column along with Commerce in two of the schools. This would account for some of the girls' dilemmas. However, time-table problems (Item a) received a relatively low rating overall when combined results were analysed (critical value 2.46, rank order 10th).

As regards commercial subjects, it really is time that schools provided all pupils, female and male, with experience of keyboard

skills. Apart from being essential in the computer age, the teaching of typewriting within the main stream curriculum in years 1-3 would alleviate the pressure on the option system and facilitate the inclusion of foreign languages in a larger number of pupils' schooling up to the school leaving age.

Boys' disliking for the German teacher does not appear to the same degree as it did for French (0.18% as opposed to 0.45%). While boys placed a low value on the importance of German, the differences between the sexes in this respect were less prominent than in the case of French. Otherwise results between the two languages were very similar.

Conclusions

The survey of option choices had sought to identify the most important factors in children's minds when considering which subjects to continue with to examination level and which to abandon at the end of the third year. It took place when pupils had just made their decisions. Thus, it was hoped that the results would reflect fairly accurately the pupils' state of mind and the influences and pressures bearing upon their decision-making. The introduction of a six-point scale provided a useful gauge to measure the strength of pupil opinions and served to highlight the most significant positive

and negative factors in a way which had proved impossible in earlier pilot surveys.

The analysis by sex of the critical value scores calculated from the raw data also offered useful pointers to discussion. In reality, however, they tended to reaffirm stereotypes rather than to challenge them. They also served to establish some basis in fact for the conjecture inherent in my earlier articles on this topic. The impression that foreign languages are seen as more demanding, that examination success is mostly an impossible or unrealistic dream, is reinforced by the pupils' reasons for rejecting French and German.

An analysis of results by school was begun but, discovering very few distinguishing features in the findings, I abandoned this in order to concentrate on the variables of language and sex and the need to present a combined set of results.

The picture that emerges from these foreign language specific results replicate, to some extent, recent, more general surveys of subject choices (Bardell, 1982; Pratt et al., 1984; Garratt, 1985), and the enquiry by Her Majesty's Inspectors into boys' experience of foreign language learning (HMI, 1985a). Like their counterparts in other schools, the children in the schools at the centre of my enquiries placed great importance on the experience of enjoyment, past and future success, and vocational relevance. Some of these pupils, however, also displayed mature judgement in deeming it wise to retain a foreign language as part of a broad curriculum so as to leave their

choice of career open for longer. In doing so, whether following directly the counselling of teachers and parents or arriving at that view independently, they were, in some measure, fighting against the over-specialisation which the existence of an option scheme tends to create.

Gaskell (1984) warns of the constraining nature of the 'institutional context' in which pupils' orientations are made. She identifies the paradox that can be seen to operate at the moment of course choices in the ways that

'students' consciousness both draws on the existing structures and serves to influence the process of recreating those structures.'
(p.93)

The survey schools had taken some care to stress the importance of breadth in their discussion of the 14-16 curriculum. Making a foreign language part of the core rather than an optional subject at that stage would not be, I suggest, so traumatic a change in provision in these schools as to render the system inoperable. There would probably be some initial displeasure among pupils in their realisation that an element of freedom had been removed. Yet, in the long term, as a language became, by convention, an accepted component of everyone's curriculum for the duration of compulsory schooling, these early problems would be reduced in proportion. In the present circumstances, the freedom to choose is not only perpetuating 'existing structures' but is exaggerating the gender-typing of subjects to the detriment of all concerned.

The questionnaire used in this enquiry, while not specifically

designed to identify the people who influence pupils' choices, did refer to both parents and teachers in this context. Parents, not surprisingly, held greater sway than teachers though their influence did not appear to be so strong here as during the second survey described earlier (Chapter 6). In the combined results there was, unexpectedly, very little difference between boys' and girls' perceptions in this respect. One might have assumed that girls would have found themselves under greater pressure than boys, as had been the case in the Burstall research (1974). The presence of German in my survey may have given rise to more balanced distribution of responses.

In these survey schools the staff had taken pains to ensure that the option publicity distributed to pupils and parents offered sound advice free from sex-stereotyping. They had also managed largely to avoid clashes between subjects which were likely to polarise the sexes numerically. It might, therefore, be concluded that the 'institutional context' was favourable and conducive to equality of opportunity. Yet stereotypical outcomes are still much in evidence, proving perhaps that it takes more than a few weeks of educational and vocational advice leading up to the options to dispel thirteen years of sex-stereotyping at home and in society.

Pratt et al. (1984) warned in their conclusion:

'The pattern of choice, though not the pattern of provision, has changed very little since the passing of the Sex Discrimination Act. There are few differences between our survey results in nine major academic areas and those from an HMI survey conducted in 1973.'
(p.225)

The survey of option choices which has been our focus during this chapter of my thesis involved 923 pupils in six comprehensive schools. It focussed on one of the major academic areas that hitherto has been the subject of sex-stereotypical judgements in and out of school. It is encouraging to report fewer and less pronounced differences between the reactions of boys and girls than might have been expected. But differences are apparent, notably in pupils' views on the importance and vocational relevance of foreign languages, especially French. These are areas in which language teachers should now strive to re-educate their pupils, the parents, their colleagues and the wider public. In their campaign to increase the status of languages, however, the broader educational value of acquiring foreign language skills while still at school should not be overlooked.

CHAPTER NINE

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN SCHOOL AND THE DROP-OUT PROBLEM: CAUSES AND REMEDIES

(Based on Chapter 4 of Boys, Girls & Languages in School, London:
CILT, 1986)

Introduction

The value placed upon learning a foreign language by pupils is, undoubtedly, enormously influenced by public attitudes to the countries where the language is spoken. A foreign language, usually French, may ostensibly be the only really 'new' subject in the curriculum of eleven or twelve-year-olds as they enter secondary schools. However, they will already have formed opinions about the speakers of the language and, by association, about the merits of learning more about them through the lessons to come.

Britain is, geographically and psychologically, an insular nation. It does not take long for the media, especially some elements of the popular press, to stir up nationalistic fervour which can so easily overflow into jingoism. People who inhabit other parts of the globe are then seen as inferior and their customs and practices as bizarre, if not ridiculous, worthy only of our derision.

Research findings suggest that boys tend to be more ethnocentric than girls; they are less interested in other cultures, supposedly more self-sufficient in their own group identity. How can language teachers promote their subjects and, at the same time, combat some of the insidious prejudices that are formed in pupils' minds outside schools?

There are reasons for believing that boys are less kindly disposed to the new experience of foreign-language learning than girls and likely to remain so as long as they study a language but, generally speaking, all first-year pupils are keen and motivated to learn. How can schools nurture and sustain this initial enthusiasm? How can pupils be convinced of the intrinsic and instrumental worth of acquiring a foreign language?

Raising the status of language learning in the minds of pupils and the general public is the task that now faces the language teaching profession. It will not be easy. What strategies can be adopted in the classroom and in the community of the school to improve the image of foreign languages, and, thereby, improve the take-up rates?

These are some of the questions that will be tackled in this chapter. Under a variety of headings I shall review a range of factors that I believe influence boys' and girls' opinions of languages. Following each section I shall list a series of suggestions under the label Remedies. My dictionary provides several definitions for this word,

one of which is 'a means of removing or counteracting or relieving any evil'. I doubt whether many people would go so far as to define the sex imbalance in languages as an evil. Yet, at the risk of using hyperbole, I consider it a sin that so much talent is currently being wasted among our school population. Competence in one or more foreign languages is the normal expectation of many other nations' children, female and male. There are many of our minority communities' children who already exhibit bilingual or trilingual skills. Ability to speak a foreign language should be deemed an asset by State and society. In Britain, however, monoglottism is an endemic disease which afflicts the vast majority of its citizens. It is time some remedies were proposed and prescribed.

Some of the recommendations made will be beyond the scope of the individual teacher or languages department - but most are not. There is some repetition as various points are emphasised. It will obviously be of major assistance if the whole school staff is involved in formulating policy for equal opportunities and, naturally, if that policy is implemented energetically by all people whom it affects. Some schools have already appointed an equal opportunities coordinator and more and more local authorities have made similar advisory appointments with the intention of monitoring practice and initiating programmes of staff development or curriculum projects leading to greater awareness of inequalities within the system. These projects have hitherto been directed, in most cases, at curriculum areas such as science, technology, maths and craft, but language departments cannot afford to be neglected. Stereotyping by

sex disadvantages both men and women in our society and affects the whole of school practices. Schools bear a major responsibility for perpetuating stereotypes in all forms; but schools can also be powerful agents of change.

FACTOR 1: STATUS & PROVISION

i) Matriculation

Foreign languages have enjoyed relatively high status as a subject in the school curriculum for most of this century. This is not unconnected with the view of language learning as a discipline, a trainer of the mind, a developer of analytical and logical skills, hence generally reserved only for the very brightest. It has even been doubted whether the female brain could cope with the strain!

'It is certainly rare to find girls whose minds the study of French seems to have done anything to strengthen or train'
(Schools Enquiry Commission Report, 1868, vol. 9. Quoted in Partington & Luker, 1984, p. 69)

Ability to master a foreign language, at least in terms of the translation skills required to pass exams, was adjudged a good predictor of high academic achievement so it became a matriculation requirement for university entrance in virtually all specialisms.

Regrettably, since the sixties, fewer and fewer universities make such demands on their aspiring undergraduates. Only a few institutions hold out with requests for an Ordinary level pass in a foreign language. The status of languages in school took a tumble when this easing of entry requirements began, and it has continued to decline ever since. Subsequently foreign languages seldom feature in the core curriculum 11-16, at least in state-maintained schools.

ii) Examinations post-16

There is currently little opportunity for pupils staying in education beyond the statutory school leaving age to pursue non-specialist language courses. The usual Advanced level curriculum does not allow much time for innovations at this level. Some schools, however, have begun to experiment with courses which offer students recognised qualifications outside the scope of the usual school examination boards (Institute of Linguists, London Chamber of Commerce, Royal Society of Arts etc). New proposals for Advanced Supplementary (AS) level examinations may go some way towards opening up opportunities for non-specialists to continue with a language, provided, that is, they have remained on course until the age of sixteen. There really ought to be room also for ab initio language courses post-16. There are plenty of teachers qualified to teach languages other than French and German who would welcome the chance to work with their 'other' languages. Proof of this 'underemployment' of language teachers was provided in the annex to a recent draft policy statement on foreign languages in the curriculum from the Secretaries of State (DES,

1986). The Department's own figures indicated that among the full-time teaching body, of those who had the necessary qualifications to teach German, only 66% were employed in that capacity. The figures for other languages were: Spanish - 46%; Italian - 20%; Russian - 14%. Presumably, many of these teachers would be teaching French, maintaining, as it were, the dominance of that 'rival' language in the curriculum. These figures, of course, take no account of part-time teachers. Nor has there been any attempt to assess the capacity for developing a more diversified language provision by encouraging back to the profession all the 'minority' language teachers whose posts have disappeared over the past few years as the curriculum has become increasingly narrow and 'second' and 'third' languages have disappeared.

iii) Options

Reduction to option status has had dire consequences for languages. The way subjects are arranged into option blocks is crucial. There are still schools where pupils are offered a 'straight' choice between physics and French. In the current climate, this obviously creates a sex-stereotypical polarisation of choices. How much longer will French groups remain viable in these schools as the pressure to take up the sciences increases on both boys and girls? In other schools, pupils have difficult decisions to take regarding a third science or a second language. Elsewhere a language has to compete with the attraction of a second humanities subject, or there appears to pupils to be a definite division between academic and practical

subjects when the first foreign language is in the option block alongside technical drawing, metalwork, domestic science or needlework. This arrangement is not only likely to perpetuate an elitist view of languages; it is also bound to reinforce sex-typing of subjects.

iv) Counselling

The way option schemes are devised and presented is central to our concerns. A study of the literature that parents and pupils receive can be illuminating. It can reveal so much of how the subjects are viewed within the school. I recently read one school's booklet which included the phrase: 'and girls considering office work are well advised to keep up a foreign language.' A few years ago this seemingly innocent piece of advice would not have given rise to comment from many people. However, attitudes have changed - at least in some sectors of society. Leaving aside the glaringly sexist nature of the phrase, there was simply no mention in the leaflet of boys with regard to languages. It is small wonder, therefore, that so many of them dismiss languages as irrelevant as far as they are concerned. Careers teachers and the local careers advisory service need to be fully conversant with job opportunities involving languages. They need also to publicise more widely the advantages that a knowledge of a language can bring in a large number of occupations. In the increasingly competitive world of education, language teachers themselves need to sell their subjects to all concerned and establish links with local employers.

v) French and Other Languages

Like many people, I believe that the dominance of French is an undesirable feature of current provision. The claims from interested parties that other languages should be given greater priority can be justified on several grounds, not least variety of choice. The second language is usually offered only on a restricted basis to those who have a good track record in the first. These pupils then take on the immensely difficult (not to say unrealistic task) of presenting themselves for public examination after considerably less contact with the subject than probably any other in the curriculum.

Stopping short of making German or Spanish the first foreign language taught, some schools now raise two languages to first foreign language status, either by alternating the language on a yearly basis or by offering one language to half the annual intake and the other to the rest. Two of the schools involved in the research described in Chapter 8 adopted the second strategy some years ago; one by an arbitrary division of the first year intake into two different language groups, the other by offering an element of parental choice of language. In the latter case numbers have, over the years, been reasonably evenly distributed. One administrative advantage is that newcomers during the school year have a choice of language classes to attend. More important is the fact that pupils are better able to make informed decisions when selecting a language course at the option stage. For other possible schemes which support the provision

of languages other than French see Hadley (1981), Schools Council (1982) and APU (1983). There are patterns of provision which can produce viable groups in the fourth year in both languages and composed of members of both sexes, provided the school remains at least of four form entry size.

There is perhaps a germ of truth in the widely held view that boys respond more positively to German than French, although at least one survey of attitudes to foreign languages among first formers in five comprehensive schools failed to discover convincing proof of this supposition (Phillips & Stencel, 1982). These researchers found no significant sex differences in the rank order of reasons for liking a language. Neither did they find any direct evidence in the reasons given for choice of German that boys regard it as somehow more 'masculine'. In the United States, however, in another small scale study (601 students in grades 1-3), there were noticeable differences in enrolment numbers and reasons for subject choices (Ludwig, 1983). Whatever the case, under normal arrangements only a minority of boys are likely to be given the chance of learning German since, by the time this second language is introduced to the 'ablest' linguists, most of the boys will have lost their place in the top ability groups.

We should not forget that Britain is really a multilingual society now because of the presence here of settled communities who regularly use a language other than English in their daily lives. A number of schools with a multilingual intake support the teaching of these

community languages on an informal basis, that is, outside the usual timetable. Ideally, however, this teaching should become more widely available. It should take place within the normal curriculum and should not necessarily be restricted to those who have these languages as their mother tongue. Table 59 gives some idea of the number of examination entries involved a few years ago.

TABLE 59: 'O' AND 'A' LEVEL ENTRIES IN MINORITY LANGUAGES:

1981

There are important messages to be derived from studying these figures. The sex imbalance in candidature, where it exists at all, is the reverse of the other traditionally taught modern languages. It should also be noted that speakers of the minority community languages often experience school timetabling difficulties if they wish to study, and be examined in, both a community language and a traditionally taught language. Language skills, not just in the mother tongue, are highly prized by speakers of our community languages, both female and male. It is a shame that the majority of the British population do not share these values.

vi) Setting by Sex

Experiments in single-sex setting for science and maths within the mixed school have, in recent years, been a source of some controversy. Originally, the idea was introduced as a way of improving the performance of girls. It was assumed that by taking

them out of classes where boys dominated numerically and vocally, girls would gain a better self-image, receive more attention from the teacher and be free to explore concepts unfamiliar to them in their own way and at their own pace. In one school where this practice was adopted the girls' achievement did seem to improve quite dramatically in science and maths (Smith, 1984). The results of the Girls into Science and Technology (GIST) project, however, were equivocal (Whyte, 1985).

In languages, such experiments are rare. In one school investigated by Batters (1987), where some sixty pupils were segregated by sex for French from the beginning of the second year to the end of the third year, teachers' opinions were split as to the success or otherwise of the scheme. One thing, however, is certain: the take-up rate for languages in this school is exceptionally high. And there was a slight increase in the numbers going on with French after the two year experiment. There was only a small margin of difference between the sexes. With both French and German offered as first foreign language to the first years, pupils can pick up the second language in the second year. The take-up for French was 71.3% for girls and 68.7% for boys; for German the figures were 45.3% for girls and 45.8% for boys.

It is difficult to draw any firm conclusion from these outcomes. The take-up rate could so easily have been more strongly influenced by other factors, e.g. teacher quality or the aptitude and preferences of that particular year group, not to mention the design of the

option scheme operating at the time. Until more schools take it upon themselves to try out such experiments and the processes and results can be rigorously evaluated, the effects of teaching languages in single-sex groupings are still debatable. Certainly the reasons for implementing such schemes in science are clear: to give girls greater opportunity to contribute, to work without the dominant male suppressing them and to facilitate the introduction of scientific concepts through topics more related to girls' everyday experience. In languages the same reasons apply to some extent. Girls still need protection from the vociferous, attention-seeking male just as some boys may benefit from working without the threat of being compared to the opposite sex in their desire to make progress in language learning.

There is some evidence that boys resent the imposition of working in single-sex groups in science and technology classes (Wilce, 1985). With their 'audience' removed, they may not find it so easy to impress their presence on the lessons. Nevertheless, notable positive aspects of this kind of arrangement for languages are that more boys and girls are guaranteed access to 'top-set' teaching, teachers expectations are raised, and programmes of work, while they should not be devised especially to highlight sex-specific differences, can take notice of them should they arise.

Status and Provision - Proposed Remedies

- * The Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (CVCP) should reconsider matriculation requirements for entrance to undergraduate courses. A good grade pass at the age of 16+ in a foreign language should normally be required for all degree courses.
- * Pupils should be made aware that obtaining a good grade pass in a language enhances their chances of entry into higher education and widens the choice of institution.
- * The new system of 'AS' levels should be promoted in schools especially for the benefit of non-specialist linguists.
- * Opportunities for learning foreign languages ab initio should be introduced in the 16-19 age range.
- * Schools should endeavour to introduce more practical foreign language courses leading, if necessary, to alternative exam qualifications such as those of the Institute of Linguists, the Royal Society of Arts and the London Chamber of Commerce and Industry. The Foreign Languages at Work Scheme (FLAW) is a particularly welcome initiative.
- * The inclusion of a foreign language in the common curriculum should be viewed as a high priority. This would not only 'obviate the possible creation of a hierarchy of subjects in option schemes' (HMI,

1985a), but would bring this country into line with our partners in Europe.

- * Where option schemes exist they should be constructed in such a way as to avoid the creation of likely sex-polarisation of choices through the juxtaposition of science and languages.

- * As a step towards including a foreign language in the common curriculum, it is necessary 'to provide curricular arrangements which encourage the majority of pupils (and therefore many more boys) to continue the study of a modern language at the option stage' (HMI, 1985a)

- * The full implications of option choices need to be spelt out in detail and repeated over a period of time to parents and pupils. Counselling and guidance prior to choice and associated documentation must be free of sex-stereotypical expectations. Pupils should be supported if they elect to take non-traditional choices.

- * Language teachers should monitor carefully the way their subjects are presented to pupils by the school. Departments should promote languages by means of posters, displays, outside speakers, films, tape-slide sequences, videotapes etc. Work opportunities involving languages should be highlighted in order to dissuade boys and girls from abandoning languages too soon.

- * Language departments should consider ways in which they can

publicise their presence in the school and community. Boys and girls together should prepare events for language days, evenings or weeks. Such cooperative ventures should not be seen as impinging on the normal programme of work, rather as being an integral part of language learning. Festivals of languages involving many different schools can act as a real morale boost for the pupils in the participating schools.

- * Schools should experiment with different patterns of provision. If staffing and pupils numbers permit, two languages should be offered with equal first foreign language status.

- * Single-sex setting does not automatically improve the learning experience of either sex, but as a short-term measure it may alleviate some of the difficulties boys and girls may experience in mixed groups and thus improve take-up rates.

FACTOR 2: TEACHERS & TEACHING

i) Sex of Teacher

It is bound to seem undesirable to some readers to take into account the sex of a teacher as a possible factor in the sex imbalance in languages among pupils. Accusations of sexism trip off the tongue very easily. Besides, according to the official figures studied in Chapter 3, the actual sex imbalance among language staff is much less

pronounced than is popularly believed. With a few exceptions (Good et al., 1973; Prawat & Jarvis, 1980), this has been an aspect of classroom presence and interaction that has been neglected by researchers.

In the field of language education, as far as I can ascertain, references to sex of teacher are also extremely limited in the literature. Carroll (1975) in his survey of French teaching in eight countries was inclined to suggest that students do better with female teachers in post-compulsory education. He discovered in his performance results that there were six significant positive values favouring females to only one favouring male in the 18+ age group. There were, he adds, sixteen other positive values for females but none reached the critical level of significance. One has to treat these claims as rather tenuous given the testing mechanisms applied and the considerable variation in cultural and educational contexts.

Hansen & Stansfield (1982) in a preliminary study of student-teacher cognitive styles and foreign language achievement monitored closely 236 ab initio Spanish students at university level. Tutors and students were labelled according to their tendencies towards 'field dependence' (FD) or 'field independence' (FI) in their learning styles. (FD and FI are usually defined as respectively contrasting tendencies to rely primarily on either external or internal frames of reference in processing information). It appeared that in the final language tests 'the contrast between FI females and FD males with FI instructors was the most marked relationship noted' i.e there was 'a

disquieting pattern of low achievement for the FD male students with FI instructors.' Female teachers represented two-thirds of the staff involved in this study, and while there were no direct links drawn to the sex of teacher in the analysis of results - cognitive style being the more important variable - it was noticeable that the men were some way behind the women in several key elements of the work.

In conversations with teachers and in written answers to questions on the language drop-out problem in general, 'sex of teacher' is regularly offered as a probable contributory factor. Some comments have been quite blunt: 'There is a surfeit of female language teachers' (woman). Others have made what may be an oversimplistic causal link: 'Four out of five members of staff are female here thus perpetuating the idea that it is a girls' subject' (man). If these responses are typical of teachers' opinions across the country - and they are merely examples from a large stock - the issue of a teacher's sex does seem to warrant further scrutiny. In doing this, it is vital to attempt to gauge pupils' perceptions of gender, because what teachers believe pupils think and what the pupils really feel may not be wholly identical.

Results of my own investigations during the past few years suggest that the sex of a language teacher is irrelevant as far as the children are concerned. During the 1985 survey 1095 third-year pupils were asked two questions about their teachers. The first was purely factual, giving their contact with female or male teachers. Table 60 provides the details.

TABLE 60: THIRD YEAR PUPILS' EXPERIENCE OF FEMALE AND MALE TEACHERS
IN 7 SCHOOLS - 1985

In the language departments of these schools the ratio of female to male staff was 1.42:1. The fact that nearly 70% of pupils in the schools had been taught by both men and women may have presented them with a more neutral view of adult involvement in the language teaching world than pupils in many other schools.

The second question invited pupils to state preferences. Table 61 summarises the results:

TABLE 61: THIRD-YEAR PUPILS' PREFERENCE FOR FEMALE OR MALE TEACHERS:
IN 7 SCHOOLS - 1985

The overwhelming rejection among 14 year-olds of any idea that one sex of teacher is to be preferred to the other is an important result of this research. It is true that when a preference is stated, it is the women who are favoured by both boys and girls, but a significant majority - four out of five pupils - have no preference.

Similar questions should now be asked of a much larger number of pupils in order to ascertain whether these pupils' responses can be considered representative of the school population at that age. Likewise, surveys could be conducted among younger and older pupils. In the second year, a similar pattern emerges as far as I can tell from my own school-based enquiries (Powell & Batters, 1985). I doubt if the reactions of older pupils would be much different. Nevertheless, it seems advisable that, whenever the circumstances permit, pupils should gain experience of being taught by both female and male staff during their first three years of language learning.

Systematic observation of the pupils in the project schools over one calendar year spanning second and third year classes also provided some interesting revelations. Of course, an observer cannot be omnipresent, watching everything that goes on during lesson time, so any accumulation of data risks producing a simplified view of the different forms of interaction taking place in the language classroom and the activities the pupils are engaged in.

On first analysis it appeared that pupils observed in classes taught by women spent a greater proportion of their time than those in male-taught classes on observing, listening to the tape, the teacher and other pupils, talking in the foreign language, writing, doing group-work exercises and 'showing spontaneity'. In contrast, pupils in classes taught by male teachers spent more time on reading, talking to other pupils, using the mother tongue and being less

involved. But the differences are slight and indeed, as expected, differences between teachers of the same sex were more in evidence. Overall the results tended to suggest that the activities occurring in a foreign language lesson are not affected in any marked way by the sex of teacher. Further details of this programme of observation are to be found in Powell & Batters (1986).

ii) Teaching approaches

a) Didactics

Language teachers, it is argued by a number of commentators, remain among the most traditional in terms of teaching styles (Partington, 1978; Peck, 1979; Westgate, 1980; Littlewood, 1982; Murray, 1983, to name a few). In studies of classroom practice, whole class, teacher-centred teaching and didactic methods tend to dominate and persist (NCLE, 1980; Partington, 1981; Sanderson, 1982; Batters, 1987). Writing up the results of one recent study of the interactional processes which characterise secondary foreign language classes, one group of researchers described the usual pattern in the following way:

'The teacher firmly controls the allocation of turns to talk, and talks for longer at each of his/her entries.....Pupils typically respond to teacher initiatives and do so briefly; teachers typically evaluate each response and initiate further responses.....The pedagogic content is clear but so is the pupil's passive role and the convergence of thought expected of him.'
(Westgate et al., 1985, p. 273)

Talk is, of course, an essential ingredient of foreign language

lesson time, but talk must be productive; that is, it must be developed with communicative goals in view.

If the above is a fair description of life in present-day classrooms, the connections with the boy-girl imbalance are relatively easy to surmise. By the time boys reach secondary school they have been conditioned to consider that 'manipulating', 'constructing' and 'doing' things are forms of behaviour - and this includes learning behaviour - consistent with being a man. They are appropriate ways of dealing with life whereas other forms of behaviour are more suited to and suitable for women. The 'Girls into Science' lobby recognises this and, in order to penetrate the 'male' territory of science it is suggested that girls gain access to, and confidence in these kinds of behaviour. Schools are urged to take every opportunity, for example:

'to provide girls with extra experience in using tools and unfamiliar equipment...to help care for apparatus, assist in putting it out, collecting and checking it and even carrying out simple repairs.'
(Harding, 1983, p. 38)

It is hoped that by deliberate policies such as these, girls' self-image in relation to science may be enhanced. But what of boys' self-esteem in relation to languages? No child relishes the thought of spending hours just listening, repeating and being called upon to answer questions to which no one really needs to know the answer or to which the answer is already known. Girls hitherto - but for how much longer? - have been conditioned into complying more readily with teachers' wishes and may accept such processes as a necessary means to an end.

b) The products of language learning

One of the major difficulties facing the foreign language teacher is to ensure that there is some tangible, visible result for all the frenetic activity invested in the learning process. So often it appears that there is not. To use Hawkins' terms, 'rehearsal' without 'performance' eventually becomes meaningless (Hawkins, 1981, p. 211). Boys and girls would benefit from a style of language learning in which the language acquired is applied as soon as possible in some constructive way. Within the classroom this will mean designing posters, charts, diagrams, writing letters that will be posted, setting out displays of drawn or written work, making mobiles or models. It will also involve pupils in performing sketches, carrying out surveys, making recordings such as compiling and producing a radio programme, or using video. Units of work should, whenever possible, be presented in some form to an 'audience' which is different from the peer group: pupils in the foreign country linked by exchange of photos, letters, comics, cassettes, parcels containing all sorts of items. Direct computer link-ups are rapidly becoming feasible. Failing this, or indeed in addition, the audience can be pupils in another local school, other classes within the year group, pupils lower down the school, other teachers, parents, governors, and on more ambitious occasions the local press and radio. All too frequently, however, so-called 'language production' is restricted to pupils' proving to their teacher alone that they can 'use' those limited items of lexis and structure which have formed

the basis of the lesson plan in the teacher's mind.

Both boys and girls would benefit if language learning offered more opportunities for problem-solving. Working with microcomputers is an obvious example, provided that the programs really challenge the mind and are not merely automated vocabulary or grammar tests. International links via school computer networks will offer a marvellous chance for direct, immediate access to teachers and pupils in the target language country.

c) The Teacher's Role

The role of the language teacher is changing. Many writers stress how communicative methodology of necessity makes greater demands on a teacher's inventiveness and ability to establish good relationships with pupils (Moskowitz, 1978; Brumfit & Johnson, 1979; Johnson & Morrow, 1981; Littlewood, 1981; Johnson, 1982; Krashen & Terrell, 1983; Richardson, 1983, inter alia). According to these and other theorists and practitioners it requires a less imposing presence, a less autocratic stance and a greater tolerance of error. Reticent pupils need constant encouragement to participate, without fear of censure or ridicule from teacher or peer-group if they utter or write inaccurate phrases. Pupils should not feel that they are walking a tightrope of failure every time they speak or commit words to paper. Being made to act out dialogues or to take on other roles in the classroom can be daunting for some boys and girls. Extrovert pupils need to be challenged into producing more than mindless repetition or

single-word responses to closed questions.

Teachers must not fall into the trap of expecting boys to have more difficulties than girls with language learning activities such as pronunciation or written work. Work should be presented with no differing expectations of involvement or achievement between boys and girls. Similarly, to create artificial competition between the sexes, for example in team games or group activities, is wholly undesirable.

Where there exist sets consisting predominantly of girls, teachers should be sensitive to the needs of the boys who form the minority. These boys may be subjected to incredible pressure from their male peers to abandon languages or to under-perform. They must be supported in their 'untraditional' choice of course of study.

There can be a tendency among inexperienced teachers to respond mostly to pupils who display their willingness to participate in the lesson by raising hands or eagerly proffering answers. Interaction research in mixed science classes shows that a teacher's time is seldom distributed equitably between the sexes (Spender, 1982; Whyte, 1983). Male domination and attention-seeking is rife! This phenomenon seems also to be manifested in foreign language lessons, so teachers really ought to be conscious of the risks of sex bias in their attention giving. There are considerable difficulties for teachers in deciding how much time to devote to individual pupils or groups of pupils within their classes, but awareness of the dangers of an uneven allocation of time can help.

It needs to be more widely recognised that the present low involvement of boys in foreign language education is unacceptable; that it is inexpedient, if not inadmissible, that so many pupils give up so readily at the age of 14. There is no substitute for good teaching. If a language department builds up a good reputation for itself by producing rewarding, interesting lessons, presenting exciting projects which engage the imagination of young people and maintaining a good record of examination successes, it is likely to attract many more boys and girls to courses in the fourth and fifth years and into the sixth-form.

iii) Teaching materials and subject-matter

'She wants to become a doctor like her father.'
'He wants to become an engineer like his mother.'
(Russian textbook for teaching English)

It is highly improbable that such statements could be found in foreign-language teaching texts in use in England. The writer of those sentences could, of course, be accused of misrepresenting normal British patterns of employment by providing a woman engineer as a social as well as linguistic model. We know only too well that there are currently very few women pursuing careers in engineering in this country. Foreign language textbooks, as indeed textbooks for most school subjects, remain conservative in that the images they present of different societies and cultures are those based on conventional, frequently outmoded stereotypes of female and male

roles and status. As such they are sexist and treat women unjustly.

The extent to which foreign language textbooks in common use discriminate against women has been well documented by several writers, and the research is not confined to teaching in this country (Jaworski, 1983). Gaff (1982) pointed accusing fingers at a couple of popular French courses. He illustrated the way in which stereotypical images can be found not just in the distribution of responsibilities within the family, but in the range and variety of activities which male characters enjoy but which are denied to female characters. Examples were cited from various elements of the course-books: illustrations, reading passages, dialogues and even grammatical exercises.

Earlier, two more writers (Hartman & Judd, 1978), reviewing texts for teaching English as a second language in the United States, pointed out the risks of omission and what they defined as 'one-sided role allocation'. More recently, a team of language teachers working in London produced a set of guidelines for teachers of languages (ILEA, 1984). These anti-sexist guidelines - the term 'anti-' clearly indicative of an interventionist policy - encompasses the study of the literature and processes of options and vocational guidance. But the bulk of the report concentrates on an analysis of texts and, most usefully, on providing a detailed set of suggestions to teachers for avoiding reinforcing sex-stereotypes. They show, for example, ways of presenting an alternative view of the world even by some minor adjustments to illustrations or text. Of course, as these

enterprising teachers acknowledge:

'It is quite unrealistic to expect that by only making some changes in the language lesson the problem of sex differentiation will be overcome.' (ILEA, 1984, p. 1-2)

Personally, I am rather doubtful that the sex-stereotyping which permeates many language teaching textbooks contributes directly to boys' or girls' disenchantment with language study. I suspect that in terms of the lessons they attend, there are other features of subject-matter that fail to appeal to adolescent tastes. Nonetheless, language departments cannot divest themselves of their responsibilities when it is a matter of combatting sexism within our education system. Besides, it is evident that they have much to gain from any measure that serves to reduce sexist imagery in subject content.

In Chapter 2, I wrote of the risks of constantly offering pupils subject-matter that contrasted greatly in its triviality and uncontroversiality with other, more absorbing, more applicable aspects of the curriculum. In recent years, several publishers have, thankfully, abandoned the artificiality of providing as focus and story-line a make-believe family living in a make-believe, supposedly foreign scenario. The format of the new text-books has improved dramatically. There is still some way to go, however, before the mismatch between pupils' level of sophistication in the modern world and the childishness of some of the topics and tasks provided is overcome completely.

It is essential that language departments review regularly the

materials they use. In times of financial cutbacks it is difficult to update resources which contain glaringly out of date, sexist images or language. The multicultural dimension should not be overlooked either, wherever the school is situated. Very few textbooks take full account of multiracial, multicultural and multilingual Britain. Foreign language textbooks often fail to represent accurately these aspects of the countries they portray. It is too glib to ask teachers to produce their own materials, although some departments have concentrated their energies and capitulation on designing carefully written worksheets or workbooks which more accurately reflect pupils' interests and contemporary life than many commercially produced materials. Not all schools are furnished with good quality reprographic facilities, however, so a departmental policy should be agreed regarding the strategies to be employed with texts. Overtly sexist or racist language or situations should be avoided, or, at the very least, challenged by teachers with their classes. Alternatives to the male-dominated, all-white world can be found.

In order to ascertain what the consumers' preferences are, language teachers should occasionally survey their classes, inviting comments about language learning activities or topics they would like to cover on their courses. According to one teacher-trainer who has done this, pupils complete questionnaires about lesson contents in a helpful and responsible way, especially when they realise that future lessons will be considerably influenced by their replies. A description of the process and results together with a copy of the questionnaire can be found in Buckby (1979). With some classes it might be appropriate to

use the survey as an opportunity in itself for language work by detailing the preferences, likes and dislikes of the group on wallcharts, writing reports or presenting oral accounts of the information accrued from one group to another - in the foreign language, of course. Larger scale surveys such as that initiated by staff at the Goethe Institut in Britain (Herrman & Meyer, 1985) have amassed ample evidence of pupils' curiosity about and eagerness to acquaint themselves with the young people for whom the target language is the mother-tongue. Plotting and studying the pupil responses in these kinds of surveys will enable teachers to be better placed to include in their lessons activities which will appeal more directly to their pupils. After all, it is a commonsense view of learning theory that states that the more control a learner has over the material to be learned, the greater the motivation to learn.

iv) Assessment

As part of my continuing enquiries into various features of the sex imbalance I have naturally, on many occasions, sought the advice and opinions of practising teachers. A breakdown of the sorts of contributions teachers have made was presented and discussed in Chapter 7. In categorising the statements for analysis, the second largest set of responses was to be found under the heading 'Assessment'. I reproduce, verbatim, a number of these teachers' statements below. The reasons for my selection and the sequence in

which they occur should become obvious.

'Boys tend to perform much worse in written exercises from their arrival from primary school (our assessments are mainly based on written work).'

'Boys seem to master the aural/oral side more easily than writing. This causes frustration when emphasis is placed on written accuracy too soon.'

'Insistence on accuracy and neatness in years 1 & 2 by teachers - girls achieve this much better.'

'In the early years girls tend to be neater and tidier in their presentation which may influence some teachers in their assessment.'

'Teachers over-encourage those who perform better, especially (sometimes) women teachers with bright girls?'

'Credit is given mainly for formal written skills and there is little scope for inventive oral work.'

'In this school there is a tendency for boys to appear "naughtier" in the first year, thereby inclining teachers to assume they are less able than may actually be the case.'

'I feel we are too easily impressed by the neatness and presentation of girls' work unless made aware of this.'

'If we are to be honest I feel we as teachers are in part responsible for this - it is all too easy to take neat, careful written work produced by girls as evidence of linguistic ability whilst boys, who are probably just as capable, tend not to pay as much attention to this area.'

Already in Chapters 3 and 8, I have pointed out the way that the pattern of the sex imbalance in the upper school can be established by what I consider to be premature setting during or at the end of the first year. Some of the teachers' comments received suggest that I may not be alone in my concern.

An earlier part of the questionnaire, from which these written comments were drawn, was intended to elicit information about how pupils were assessed prior to setting. Table 62 displays the

different tools of assessment in the order of frequency of use. There is an impressive array of tests being operated in the schools. Clearly, the more complex the assessment procedure, the more time required to administer it and teachers rightly complain that they are given very little time to make decisions that affect children's lives in a critical way.

TABLE 62: ASSESSMENT OF PUPILS PRIOR TO SETTING

One school claimed to use a combination of eight different sets of information but the majority used only two. Two schools relied on a single measure of achievement (no.6), the teachers in both these schools feeling competent to set pupils by ability well before Christmas in the first year.

The dominance of teacher grades on impression of classroom performance is, perhaps, inevitable. But as all teachers know, children are adept at creating and reinforcing false impressions of their potential and then performing according to teacher expectations. Besides, it is not always judicious for a pupil to display too much enthusiasm in front of the peer group. Even during the first year of secondary school, gaining a reputation for being 'keen' is not the safest course to follow. Teacher compliments can cause embarrassment as well as pleasure. In some pupil sub-cultures they are to be avoided at all costs. Similarly, gaining good marks for neat, colourful written work - frequently low-level activities such as labelling and drawing - may not fit into the image that many boys seek for themselves. Moreover,

it must be recognised by teachers that these kinds of exercises are not the best indicator of linguistic potential.

The graded objectives movement has provided participating schools with further means of assessing pupils on a regular basis. Many of the newer language courses on the market include their own batch of testing materials which can yield useful additional information about pupils' oral, aural and reading skills. These should compliment the written tests which teachers may still wish to devise. More extensive use of aptitude tests might also furnish better all-round information about pupils' potential when used in conjunction with other summative tests.

If the assessment procedures used to allocate pupils to ability sets or bands continue to produce such a lop-sided effect and, thereby, deny a fair distribution of places to each of the sexes, then there will continue to be only a minority of able boys who gain access to courses leading to public examinations and the consequent decline in linguistic capability of this country will be assured.

Teachers and Teaching - Proposed Remedies

* Every school should create an appointment for an equal opportunities coordinator who should initiate staff development and awareness programmes across the curriculum and monitor school

policies and practices.

- * Every language department should, in addition, take on responsibility for assessing and regularly reassessing its role within the framework of an equal opportunities philosophy. This would include an evaluation of the appropriateness of materials, keeping a record of class or set rolls and, through a programme of reciprocal observation or self-appraisal, considering ways in which the actual teaching and learning process might improve, to the benefit of both female and male pupils.

- * Whenever possible, pupils should experience language teaching by both female and male staff during the first three years of secondary school. Team teaching can sometimes present opportunities for pupils to work with teachers of both sexes where one sex is in the minority.

- * Any overt or covert suggestion that language teaching, or any other career involving languages, is an inappropriate occupation for men should be challenged.

- * Similarly, boys should be presented, by means of posters, job advertisements, visiting speakers etc., with examples of men successfully pursuing careers where foreign language competence is an important part of their job. These role models should be drawn from as many different spheres of the world of work as possible.

- * Teachers should adopt a less didactic style of teaching and aim to

provide pupils with more opportunities for individualised learning, pair or group work at all levels.

- * There should be more variety in lesson planning - less ritual, more elements of surprise.

- * Language work, whenever possible, should yield some tangible, visible outcome.

- * Short-term objectives should be realistic and explained to pupils in accessible terms.

- * Teachers should adopt a more flexible attitude towards pupil errors, especially in exploratory oral work.

- * Problem-solving activities should be devised which present boys and girls with a worthwhile challenge.

- * The foreign language classroom should reflect the foreign culture and provide space for display of pupils' work and that of their contacts abroad.

- * The foreign language should, as much as possible, be the medium of instruction as well as the subject-matter.

- * Teachers should have the highest possible expectations of potential and performance of their pupils, irrespective of sex.

* A campaign should be launched by every language department to influence those who influence the choices pupils make at the option stage. The wisdom of retaining a foreign language to examination level should be understood by all concerned and transmitted to pupils in the lead-up to option choices.

* Language staff should challenge written or spoken statements, for example in careers advice, that present or even hint at a sex-stereotypical view of society, especially if they impinge on the pupils' perception of the usefulness or relevance of languages for the different sexes.

* Teaching materials should be reviewed with the purpose of eliminating sexist or racist images or language.

* Each department should possess a coherent scheme of work which takes account of pupil interests and allows some opportunities for exploring conventional female and male topics.

* Parents and colleagues in school should be given the chance to update their impressions of languages in school by attending classes or open evenings where the department's work is explained in detail through observation of lessons, video-recordings, displays of work, equipment, resources etc.

* Language departments in mixed schools should critically review

their policy regarding setting and banding. Methods of assessing pupils' abilities and potential should include a battery of tests taking into account all language skills and the differing rates of personal maturation and academic development of the two sexes.

- * An annual review of class rolls should be carried out in the mixed school in order to monitor any unwarranted sex imbalance and to investigate causes.

- * More research is needed into those processes which affect boys' and girls' readiness to pursue an extended course of foreign language study to examination level at 16+ and 18+.

FACTOR 3: THE PUPILS THEMSELVES

i) Understanding learners' experiences

It has been my intention during this review of possible causes for the sex imbalance in languages to keep in mind the pupil perspective of language learning. Yet certain factors remain unexplored or need reinforcing in this final section.

Languages do not generally feature among the best-loved of school

subjects, as has been shown by the surveys described in Chapter 7. Regrettably, even in schools which can be justifiably pleased with their language department's work, especially in their ability to attract a good proportion of pupils staying on beyond the option stage, languages remain among the most unpopular subjects on the time-table for a large number of pupils. Decidedly, there is a lack of intrinsic motivation among young people learning a foreign language, so teachers are obliged to create incentives - and there does not appear to be a superabundance of these. Pupils will stay with a subject if they feel they stand a reasonable chance of succeeding in examinations, but this will usually only apply to the ablest. Even here the examination will often be seen as a means to a different end, i.e. not involving languages themselves. Relevance to one's career is a notion that has to be proved to pupils and, currently, in the case of languages, that seems easier to do as far as girls are concerned. It is much more difficult for teachers to influence boys' choices by direct reference to career orientations.

In the meantime, therefore, greater awareness of why pupils are not intrinsically motivated about languages, why they do not enjoy the experience per se, might help to show teachers the way to stimulate renewed and sustained interest in and a better response to, the task of acquiring a foreign language. Clearly, there are numerous reasons why a school subject should appeal less to some pupils than to others, but children rarely express their dissatisfaction in a precise way. They prefer to use predictable and unhelpful adjectives such as 'boring'. Occasionally, however, sifting through interview

recordings or questionnaires addressed, for the most part, to third-year pupils, I have come across comments which point to more specific aspects of lesson content and teaching methods which have contributed to pupils' disenchantment for foreign language study.

The comments printed below should be read in conjunction with those reproduced in Chapter 6, Part 2. They tend to add strength to the opinion of many teachers that languages represent a particularly difficult area of the school curriculum. All pupil comments are quoted verbatim.

For some pupils, languages make intolerable demands on their powers of attention and involvement:

'French is very hard, it needs complete concentration.' (boy)
'I can't concentrate for that long.' (girl)
'Because I bearly understand. I'm rushed to fast.' (girl)
'I cannot understand it and I loose my concentration.' (girl)
'I like doing nothing though this is rare with my teacher.' (boy)

Can a foreign language be the only subject in which pupils are expected to learn as opposed to 'experience'? Some pupils seem to think so. This possibly unique claim to exercising the memory is not a point in its favour for some pupils:

'French has too many verbs to learn. It's a good 'O' level to have but I would rather get history, geography and biology instead.' (girl)
'Because the learning is hard and the rules are complecated to learn. I find it hard to get on with French.' (boy)
'There's too much to learn which makes it all rather complicated.' (girl)
'I hate learning so many French verbs.' (boy)

I have to sympathise with the average third-former who can so easily gain the impression that French and German have many more tenses than English and ten times as many irregular verbs. German prepositions also appear as monumental difficulties for most learners. Teachers need to examine very carefully their third-year syllabuses so that some relief is provided from what can so easily become a 'grammar-grind'. If only more pupils felt like this girl:

'I dislike all the vocab tests but alas! these are important.'

Or this boy:

'I think its quite a challenge to work out what people are saying on the tape and I enjoy working out the questions.'

Such examples of integrative motivation and perseverance are all too infrequent, unfortunately.

Care needs to be taken to ensure that pupils gain a sense of progression in their grasp of the language. A syllabus designed along notional-functional lines is one where topics are introduced and explored at one level and then, some time later - even a year or two later - they are probably reconsidered at a more advanced level of complexity of lexis, structure and register. This is admirable if pupils are able to understand and accept the rationale. Failure to comprehend will lead them to assume that they are not making progress; that the repetition of topics in effect means that they are back-tracking. Such an impression may reduce motivation considerably. Pupils' reactions show that they are obviously concerned by this apparent lack of progression:

'In French its the same things over and over again.' (boy)

'I don't think I'm any better now than I was in the first year.' (boy)

'We always seem to be doing the same things like shopping etc.' (boy)

It may be no coincidence that these, and many other comments along the same lines, were made by boys.

Other comments by third-year boys and girls have suggested that foreign language lessons are the source of considerable nervousness and trepidation for some. One or two examples will illustrate possibly why.

'I don't like reading aloud. I feel such a fool.' (boy)

'I dislike speaking oral to the teacher (sic) because if you say something wrong you get all embarrassed so the next time you try to get out of doing it.' (girl)

'I get upset when teachers get annoyed when you can't pronounce words properly because it's quite difficult to remember every accent, sound and so on.' (boy)

'The French teacher goes too fast when she's teaching us and sometimes I can't understand it very well so I have to ask and then she gets angry and tells me off.' (girl)

'French scares me as its always so fast moving and leaves me high and dry.' (girl)

The demands on pupil concentration and participation that typify current approaches to language teaching can certainly act as a disincentive to continue for some pupils. One local survey aimed at identifying pupils' school-based anxieties produced sobering results for the French teachers in the county of Somerset. French was only second to spelling as a focus of pupils' fears and worries in that section dealing with subject specific aspects.

TABLE 63: SCHOOL ANXIETIES ASSOCIATED WITH CURRICULUM SUBJECTS

Other reasons for the comparative unpopularity of languages are probably more associated with instrumental goals, i.e. how useful a

subject appears to further one's career aspirations or educational advancement. Boys are under a great deal of pressure to do subjects which adults, especially their parents, consider will be useful to them in these senses. I am reminded of the question that one local teacher posed in response to a question that I had asked on the sex imbalance: 'Do parents allow girls to opt for subjects they like while boys have to "prepare for a career"?' Boys have often decided in the second year whether they are planning to do a language 'seriously' or not. Often they will not. By emphasising so much the role of science and technology in contemporary society, our politicians, the media, our educational planners and those who fund educational initiatives and research devalue all other curriculum areas, especially, to my mind, languages. It is a sad truth that many young people have convinced themselves that there is no pressing reason to study languages other than to acquire an extra examination subject in order to enhance their chances of gaining access to higher education, or to offer a more respectable 'academic' profile to future employers.

ii) Gender Perceptions

At several times during the writing of this thesis I have warned about the dangers of over-simplification. I have been struck in my discussions with practising teachers how the current unequal representation of boys and girls in foreign language education can be dismissed with remarks such as: 'It has always been like this; I suspect it will stay just the same whatever you do'. This is not only

defeatist, it is manifestly not true. Adults assume that they understand children's minds all too easily. There is in circulation the belief that boys almost automatically consider languages as 'girls' subjects' and thereby abandon languages at the earliest opportunity. This also is an unfounded, not to say arrogant assumption on the part of those that voice it.

I determined early in my own research to ask pupils directly whether they thought it made any difference being a boy or a girl studying a foreign language. (See Chapter 6, Part 2, iii) If, indeed, they had decided that a pupils's sex does make a difference, I could hardly be accused of putting ideas into their heads. On the contrary, I was pleased to note how strongly pupils have rejected both the ideas

a) that one sex is more likely to be better at languages than the other

b) that it is more important for one sex to study languages than the other

These questions were asked during the survey of pupils' perceptions about language learning and option choices conducted in seven mixed comprehensive schools during the summer term of 1985. (See Chapter 8) It will be remembered that the pupils who responded were in the latter stages of their third year of secondary schooling.

The results are given in Tables 64 and 65.

TABLE 64: PUPIL PERCEPTION OF RELATIVE PERFORMANCE OF THE SEXES

IN FOREIGN LANGUAGES:

7 SCHOOLS - 1985

TABLE 65: PUPIL PERCEPTION OF RELATIVE IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGES

FOR BOYS AND GIRLS:

7 SCHOOLS - 1985

Where pupils did perceive differences, it was generally in support of their own sex, not unnaturally. The one exception is the recognition among a substantial minority of boys that girls seemed to be coping better than themselves. Further computer analysis would assist in the precise identification of those boys who held this opinion. I suspect that they consisted primarily of those who were floundering in the bottom sets or lower bands in the schools. Judging from the occasional written comment added to this section of the questionnaire, a number of girls seem to recognise that some boys are trailing behind.

'In the first few years girls learn the languages better but afterwards when boys have got the idea of the language it doesn't make much difference.' (girl)

'I think the boys will catch up with the girls in the fourth-year because they will understand the language and won't mess about so much.' (girl)

By and large, however, it does seem that pupils resist evaluating their own performance in languages by direct comparison with their peers of the opposite sex. Neither do they accord higher value to girls' achievement. In short, given the opportunity to express a view, they dismiss some of the sex-stereotypical opinions with which they are accredited by teachers, researchers and other adults. Further proof of these findings resulting from intensive interviews as opposed to questionnaire responses is to be found in Batters (1986 & 1987).

This is good news for those of us who believe that it is vital that the drift away from languages by some girls, but especially boys, is to be halted. It also presents us with a challenge. Parents, administrators, advisers, teacher trainers, student teachers, careers advisers, headteachers, senior teachers, year tutors, and all other teachers, language teachers included, we all need educating about equality of opportunity as far as languages are concerned. The value, usefulness, relevance and rewards of foreign language learning need to be publicised, especially, perhaps, to parents for whom the experience of language lessons during their own education some years before may not have been the most stimulating.

The importance of involving parents is borne out in my investigations into the options process. The results there confirm those of an earlier Schools Council exploratory study involving ten schools in which 228 fourth-formers were asked how they reached their decisions about option choices. They were presented with eleven factors that might have helped them come to a decision. For each factor pupils were asked to register the strength of their opinions using a six-point scale. Table 66 gives, in rank order, the items receiving positive reactions.

TABLE 66: INFLUENCES ON OPTION CHOICE DECISION-MAKING

Numerically at least, advice from parents, school option information and teachers was substantially more important as an influence than

contacts with friends or messages through the media. How important, therefore, for language departments to verify that their subjects are being presented in an accurate, non sex-stereotypical and valid way to pupils at that crucial time. Establishing closer links with parents must also be seen as a high priority for language teachers. No careers convention should take place in school or the locality without a strong representation by language teaching staff. Languages should also become an integral part of pre-vocational courses at school and college level.

Pupil-focussed Remedies

* Making languages 'fun' without developing a coherent programme of learning will act only as a short-term palliative. Nonetheless, teachers should heed pupil warnings that lessons are 'boring' and strive to stimulate increased interest and enjoyment through greater variety, lively presentation and by offering pupils a keener sense of involvement, achievement and progress.

* More encouragement should be given to pupils making non-traditional choices (i.e. boys taking languages) and special support for minority sex-groups should be sustained.

* Pupils' pre-conceptions of sex-roles should be challenged inside and outside the classroom.

* The syllabus for the third-year should not be so influenced by

examinations in the fifth year as to become a dull grammar-based course.

- * Pupils should be made more aware of the rationale underlying the language syllabus. Teachers should explain to them, in a manner which allows full comprehension, why certain topics require further study at certain times.

- * A system of assessment by profiling should be a central part of every language department's scheme of work. Thereby, pupils themselves can understand and contribute to the way in which their progress in a language is being assessed.

- * Teachers should not pressurise pupils to perform in front of their peers.

- * Teachers should plan their lessons so that activities requiring intense concentration are interspersed with other, less strenuous activities.

- * The Language Teaching Associations should produce posters, photographs, displays of advertisements, job descriptions, accounts of work experience and lists of speakers etc., to enable departments to publicise the importance of their subjects at the time of option choices.

- * Language departments should examine all the materials distributed

by their schools in the period preceding option choices to ensure that foreign and community languages are given ample coverage and treated in a sensitive, non-sexist way.

* Schools should encourage their pupils to take part in events which display their linguistic talents and involve the local press and radio in broadcasting pupils' work and achievements.

It will be apparent from reading the above sets of recommendations for improving the take-up of boys and girls into foreign language classes, that I consider that the most realistic way forward and the most likely solutions lie in the hands of the language teachers themselves. Yet there are signs that the current situation facing the language teaching profession is a matter of some concern for those that plan and administer education at the highest level.

It is hoped that the slow progress towards the implementation of a National Policy for foreign languages in the curriculum will eventually result in a coherent working set of practices that help rather than hinder the teaching profession. At the time of writing this conclusion, we are promised by the Secretaries of State for Education that the final form of the Policy Statement will take full account of teachers' comments and suggestions. Foreign languages are also to be the subject of an Inspectorate publication in the

important 'Matters for Discussion' series. We know too that Her Majesty's Inspectors have made it their duty to investigate schools which operate a curriculum with a foreign language in the core and that their impressions will be published as an Inspection Report.

Whether or not local authorities and schools pay heed to the policies that will emanate from Government remains to be seen. There is clearly going to be needed some form of evaluation of the impact of the Policy Statement, for example in the essential matter of diversification of language provision. Of central interest also will be, of course, that aspect of foreign language education which this thesis has addressed, namely, the boy-girl imbalance.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

During recent years, funds have been found for major projects designed to raise public consciousness and pupils' awareness of the desirability of including sciences in one's curriculum to examination levels. The Equal Opportunities Commission has made it one of its high priorities to pursue a campaign along these lines. Similar endeavours have been made by special interest groups such as the Girls and Mathematics Association (G.A.M.M.A.). This body has investigated why mathematics seems to appeal less to girls than to boys.

The results of my enquiries over the past few years have indicated quite clearly that there is a case for monitoring, at national level, the increasing sex differentiation in foreign languages. So far, however, none of the language teaching associations has really paid much attention to this issue. Neither has the one forum that brings together the widest possible range of language interests - The National Congress on Languages in Education - deemed this a topic worthy of further investigation by one of its working parties.

There are several reasons for this apparent lack of concern. First of all, there is the question of financing research projects or enquiries of this kind. National priorities, as reflected in the policies of the usual funding agencies, tend to be focussed on aspects of education that appear to have direct applicability and relevance to the economy. Strange to say, that the nation needs

talented linguists of both sexes is a concept still to be understood by those responsible for administering finance or drawing up policies. Secondly, to be seen to be supporting the case for more attention to be paid to boys in school (in so far as one is urging for greater numbers in foreign language classes), can be interpreted as running counter to the current climate of opinion in which, quite rightly, the education of girls is the prime focus. In my discussions with teachers and during my lectures across the country, I am sometimes faced with people who misunderstand my motives. They fail to see that the sex imbalance in languages is one further manifestation of sex-stereotyping in schools that needs to be eliminated. I am not pleading a special case for the male of the species. Limiting the discussion on equal opportunities to girls and science is to ignore the fact that current practice in schools and the hidden curriculum of preconceptions, expectations and advice that sustains it works to the detriment of both sexes in science and languages. The elimination of the sex-typing of any curriculum subject should be the goal of the equal opportunities 'lobby'.

There are, perhaps, as many questions raised during the course of this thesis as are answered. Below are to be found some of the more important topics requiring further investigation and research. They are not presented in any special order of priority.

* There are obvious risks in prolonging the discussion about 'biological' factors affecting foreign language acquisition. However, I believe it worth pursuing further studies of learner variables

(including sex) in specific linguistic skills, such as listening comprehension.

* There is merit also in evaluating the effects of reorganising classes into single-sex groups within the mixed school. It is doubtful, however, whether sufficient numbers of schools where at the moment this takes place could be found to make this a realistic research project.

* There should be continuing study of the cognitive processes involved in learning a foreign language. First language acquisition research is a burgeoning field, but the emphasis now needs to shift to include second and foreign languages. Projects such as The Good Language Learner (Naiman et al, 1978) have yielded interesting findings but similar investigations should now be conducted in the more formal context of British school classrooms.

* More extensive - and more subtle - enquiries are needed into pupils' sex-labelling of school work. The 'direct question' approach adopted by myself and others leads to the conclusion that pupils do not, to anything like the extent previously imagined, consider languages as subjects reserved for girls. However, the concepts of sex-specificity or sex-stereotyping in education are complex and need further investigation in so far as they affect the image of languages.

* There should be a large-scale study of schools in which pupils are

taught languages in mixed-ability groups for the duration of the normal five-year course leading to first examinations. A comparative perspective focussing on European or North American situations might add valuable insights.

* It would be fascinating to investigate how pupils' and the general public's attitudes to various languages are formed, especially any gender-specific associations that may prevail. What really creates the 'femininity' of Romance languages and the 'masculinity' of the Germanic tongues? To what extent do cultural mores and national stereotypes affect pupils' perceptions of languages?

* There should be a thorough and rigorous evaluation of the claims of those teachers who have adopted so-called humanistic techniques of teaching foreign languages.

* It is recognised that the school-based enquiries described in this thesis are small-scale. There is urgent need for a national monitoring of the drop-out problem. This should not simply produce statistics of examination entries but should seek directly the views of pupils in order to find ways of improving motivation.

* More case studies should be carried out in schools where languages are taught successfully, where the take up is high and pupils of both sexes elect freely to continue with a language beyond the option stage and into post-compulsory education.

* Similarly, there should be a concerted effort by local authorities and HMI to inspect those schools where the sex imbalance is particularly in evidence. Aspects such as staffing, materials, organisation, teaching quality, social milieu, attitudes and ethos, etc., should come under review.

* We need to increase our understanding of pupils' definitions of success and failure in school, particularly with regard to their expectations of foreign language achievement.

* We also should enquire among pupils how they evaluate and prioritise the different subjects in the school curriculum.

* It is twelve years since the HMI survey of curricular differences, (Education Survey, no. 21). Manifestly there is a need for a reappraisal of the national situation regarding sex differentiation in the curriculum. Regular monitoring is essential.

* Much of the attitudinal research in foreign language learning has been directed at measuring learners' attitudes towards the target language and target language speakers. There has been much less attention paid to finding out learners' perception and understanding of the process itself. More 'feedback' from pupils about their lessons by means of structured interview or spontaneous speech or writing could shed light on pupil preferences and any sex difference among them.

* My enquiries among third-year pupils have suggested that the majority of pupils are indifferent to the sex of their language teacher; that it is not an influential factor on their attitudes to languages or on their decisions to drop or continue with the subject. Larger surveys are now needed to assess how representative those pupils' opinions are of the whole school population.

* We need to examine in detail the role and influence of parents in decisions about curricular choices. Parental attitudes towards languages in school also represent an area of investigation that could provide the language teaching profession with recommendations for improving the image of languages generally.
